

**Overlapping Worlds: The Religious Lives
of Orthodox Jewish Women in
Contemporary London**

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Declaration

I, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

Abstract

Though the exclusion of contemporary Orthodox Jewish women from active roles in public worship and other central religious activities has been condemned as patriarchal oppression by feminists and lauded as freeing women for sacred domestic duties by Orthodox apologists, little research has been carried out on Orthodox women's religious lives and self-understanding. This study uses participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and monitoring of community email lists and media to document women's religious activities in London; to investigate the constraints that shape these activities; and to examine women's exercise of agency and creativity within these constraints to shape a rich, changing, and sometimes contested set of spiritual opportunities.

The study examines four spheres of action, defined by the intersection of two axes: communal-individual arenas and culturally sanctioned-innovative practices. Alongside culturally sanctioned activity such as synagogue attendance and observance of the sexual purity system, innovative and hitherto unknown practices such as *berakhah* (blessing) parties exist, besides more controversial attempts to participate in public worship, both in women-only services and mixed services (partnership *minyanim*). The patterns and transmission of women's individual customs are also examined, elucidating their religious significance for women.

In addition to recording new practices, the study documents two periods of accelerated change, in the early 1990s and from 2005 onwards. It suggests that Orthodox women may be divided into three permeable groups—*haredi* (ultra-Orthodox'), identitarian/traditionalist, and Modern Orthodox—and examines the worldviews and innovative techniques displayed by each group. Factors such as education, community pressure, and norms of the non-Jewish community combine with differing group outlooks to give a nuanced explanation of the rich variation within Orthodox women's religious lives. The study provides a basis for cross-communal research into Jewish women's spirituality and models the complex interplay and impact of social and personal factors on religious life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, aims, and outline

About forty women are sitting at long, plastic-covered tables in the women's section of a Sefardi synagogue in north-west London. We are a varied lot: on my left is a Tunisian divorcee in her 60s who has confided that she isn't religious but likes being around religious people and hopes that the prayers this evening will help her find a new husband, and on my right is a young *haredi*¹ woman in a wig, worn to cover her hair as prescribed by Jewish law for married women, who pronounces each blessing very loudly with great emphasis on each word. Some women are in their late teens, a few in their 60s; there are a couple of Nigerian converts, with elaborately tied headscarves; some women are chatting or texting, while others are intent on following the slow recital of blessings over food, as one by one each woman picks up a piece of carrot or celery from the plates in front of her, recites the Hebrew blessing prescribed for vegetables, and bites into it while everyone else responds with a loud 'Amen!'. Occasionally a woman precedes her blessing with the names of people who are ill, who she hopes will benefit from the merit that she will earn by saying the blessing and that others will acquire by responding to her words. Sitting at a separate table at the head of the room is a grey-haired, tangle-bearded rabbi, invited along as honorary leader of this women's ritual; he is busy alternately texting and studying a religious text—Torah study takes precedence over everything—until he is asked to recite a prayer for all the sick mentioned, once the women have finished their blessings. Amid reverent murmurings of 'Amen!' that break out at the end of his prayer, the Israeli organizer stands up. 'Ladies!', she announces. 'I have incredible news! As you know, we've been *davning* [praying] for our dear Sarah Rivka for a long time, and she hasn't been eating, and I wanted to share with you that yesterday she had her first meal for two weeks, and is much better! *Barukh hashem* [Blessed be God]!' As a chorus of delighted gasps and '*Barukh hashem*'s breaks out, Menucha Mizrahi, a middle-aged woman in a blonde wig, leaps to her feet and shouts, 'I went to the Shotser Rebbe's *kever* [grave] last week and *davned* and lit two candles for her

¹ *Haredi*, literally 'trembling' (i.e. before God), a recent term popularized in Israel, is used here in preference to the somewhat clumsy and judgemental labels of 'ultra-Orthodox' or 'strictly Orthodox', which imply that other forms of Orthodoxy are less 'authentic' or 'strict'. See discussion of the terms 'community' and 'Orthodox', and the working definitions of subsets of Orthodoxy, in Ch. 2.

there!’ A younger, Israeli woman proclaims, ‘I held a *halah* party² in her *zekhut* [merit] last week in my house!’ Women exclaim and call out praise to God, topped by the organizer shouting, ‘May we merit to see many more *yeshuot* [miraculous deliverances] from our *berakhot* [blessings]!’

A few months later and a mile away, about eighty women and a few dozen children, squashed into a classroom at London School of Jewish Studies, have just finished listening to the Megillah, the book of Esther, chanted from a handwritten scroll by a series of women. It’s the morning of Purim, the most exuberant and fun-filled festival in the Jewish calendar, and many women are wearing fancy dress, as are the children; most are carrying a copy of the Megillah and a *grager*, a rattle swung at every mention of the villain Haman during the reading, in order to blot out his name. Two women are putting money in the bowl set out for charity donations. This is one of the commandments linked to the festival, as is the giving of food to acquaintances; friends hand me decoratively wrapped cardboard plates filled with homemade biscuits, luridly coloured sweets, and tangerines, and I rummage in a bag to extract my own gifts. This is the tenth year the women’s reading has been held; though in a standard service the entire book is read by one man, we encourage as many women as possible to learn the special chant, and have ten readers, one per chapter. I have just read chapter 9, and like everyone else, am still riding high on the atmosphere of excitement and achievement. As everyone files out of the overheated room, talking and laughing, an elderly woman, wearing a turban-like headdress, approaches me and lays her hand on my arm. ‘I just wanted to say that I didn’t really want to come today—my daughter insisted, though I wasn’t sure that I approved of women reading the Megillah. But now that I’ve heard it, I can’t see how I would ever want to go back to sitting in the gallery and trying to make out what the men are doing down below! Hearing the story read by women—it’s amazing! Of course it’s all about Esther—but I would never have believed the difference women’s voices would make! I was so moved!’

* * *

² See Ch. 4, for *halah* parties.

The double invisibility of Orthodox Jewish women

The lively, noisy, and—above all—new religious activities documented in these two vignettes undermine common depictions of the religious lives of Orthodox Jewish women as limited, passive, and restricted to the domestic sphere. As an observant Jewish woman, I am constantly taken aback by the frequent representations of Jewish women as voiceless, marginalized figures deprived by an unchallenged patriarchal system of any agency or expression:

[T]he overseers of these [social] arrangements intimidated women through a system that would brand anyone who dissented from the patriarchal order, or even criticized it, as a rebel, a whore, a harlot, a traitor, or a deviant. In this way, there emerged a situation in which women (impure, silent, and ignorant by reason of being removed from sanctity and knowledge) were subservient to men (pure and learned, near to holiness and study, publicly vocal) in many areas, both external and internal. They were denied access to many sorts of knowledge, their entry into the study hall was forbidden, their entry into the synagogue was limited, and they were required to maintain complete silence in the public domain.³

Many of the Orthodox women among whom I live, though often painfully aware of restrictions and limitations on their religious expression, are engaged in Jewish study and teaching, sometimes challenge their role in ritual, and are far from silent in the public domain. In turn, Orthodox Judaism's standard apologetic justifying women's exclusion from the public arena is just as misleading, portraying them as powerful, central figures in a domestically-focused Judaism:

Throughout the ages, Jewish women have imbued spirituality into the Jewish home. As such, certain mitzvot⁴ are set aside especially for women because of their special connection to the home. [...] the Torah released women from the obligations of certain time-bound mitzvot. [...] these exemptions allow a woman the ability to be totally devoted to her family without the constraints of having to fulfill such mitzvot at the correct time. Of course, whenever a

³ Elijah, 'Like Sophia', 5.

⁴ 'Commandments'. These are divided into positive (enjoining an activity) and negative (prohibiting an activity), as well as those which must be performed at a set time ('timebound') and those which have no associated time. Women are halakhically exempt from performing positive timebound commandments (*mitsvot shehazeman geraman*), with some rather arbitrary exceptions, such as eating matzah on Passover. However, not all positive timebound commandments are equal in gender weighting; while women's performance of some of them is very common and even encouraged (e.g. saying the Shema twice daily or eating in a *sukah* on Sukkot), other instances of women's performance of this category of *mitsvah* would be very controversial (e.g. wearing *tsitsit* [ritual fringes] or *tefilin* [phylacteries]).

woman does not face conflicting family obligations, she may fulfill these mitzvot and receive eternal reward.⁵ Whatever the case, she is fulfilling God's will, who knows that her spiritual growth is intertwined with her primary mission as the family cultivator.⁶

This sketch ignores those Orthodox women who are single, widowed, divorced, or whose children have grown up, as well as those whose lives and religious experience extend beyond the boundaries of their homes, as professionals, Jewish educators, synagogue presidents, and students of Torah. Both pictures are caricatures. As will be shown, Orthodox women engage in a wide range of communal and domestic religious activities, despite their exclusion from active roles in synagogue worship and from some areas of Torah study, both of which are central religious activities. Orthodox and non-Orthodox writers alike assume that the 'core' of Jewish religious life is public worship and Torah study, but while this may be true for men, it is a misrepresentation of Jewish women's experience. This is yet another example of the difficulty of actually seeing women's lives that Edwin Ardener discussed in his seminal article 'Belief and the Problem of Women' (1975): 'if the models of a society made by most ethnographers tend to be models derived from the male portion of that society, how does the symbolic weight of that other mass of persons—half or more of a human population, as we have accepted—express itself?'⁷

Ellen Umansky points out that

Early feminist studies of the religious lives of Jewish women [...] shared the assumption that the study of religious texts and participation in public worship constituted what [Paula] Hyman labeled the 'heart and soul of traditional Judaism'. Women's exclusion from these areas made them little more than 'peripheral' Jews (i.e. radically different from men, who do not take into account 'the objective reality of women's lives, self-concept and education'). Without denying these conclusions, more recent feminist studies have recognized that to view study and communal worship as the heart and soul of traditional Judaism and then to focus on how women were excluded from (or sought to gain acceptance in) these areas is to accept an essentially androcentric vision of Judaism. This vision, focusing on the activities of men,

⁵ This is a disingenuous statement, given that the same web page classifies two *mitzvot* from which women are 'exempted' (*tsitsit* and *tefilin*) as totally forbidden to them.

⁶ 'Jewish Women & Mitzvot', on the outreach website Aish.com, <<http://www.aish.com/jl/m/w/Women--Mitzvot.html>> (accessed 1 Dec. 2013).

⁷ Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women', 4.

universalizes their experiences and assigns them primary importance and at the same time minimizes or ignores the reality of women's religious lives.⁸

While this is a vital point, it is essential not to fall into the trap of espousing a mirror image of this androcentric claim, in which the Jewish woman's mission of creating a truly Jewish home in which the next generation of Jews can flourish is defined as the real centre of Judaism, with men's activities in synagogue and *beit midrash* (study house) relegated to an insignificant periphery; this argument has indeed been made by some recent Orthodox apologists. Both domestic and public arenas are central to Judaism, necessitating investigation of both the under-reported and often undervalued experience of women in the domestic context, and of women's experience in the equally significant communal and public zone. This is the rationale underlying my research.⁹

The separate nature of the religious lives of Orthodox men and women, and the invisibility of Orthodox women's experience to their male coreligionists (and thus to the non-Jewish world),¹⁰ is illustrated in a recent popular introduction to Judaism, in which a Modern Orthodox rabbi gives a sketch of 'a day in the life of a practising Jew' in twenty-first-century Britain, starting in the evening, the beginning of the Jewish day:

The first ritual of the day following nightfall is the recitation of *ma'ariv*, the evening prayers. [...] In general, prayers ought to be recited in the presence of a *minyan*, a quorum of ten male Jews above the age of thirteen. It is for this purpose that many observant Jews will go to the synagogue each evening. If it is not possible to pray with a minyan one may recite the prayers alone, with certain omissions. [...] mealtime has its own set of rituals, consisting mainly of blessings of thanksgiving to God both before as well as after eating [...] even an act as mundane and material such as eating can be infused with holiness. This is especially so if one eats in a dignified manner cognizant of the fact that one is, through this act, keeping body and soul together. [...] At some point in the evening an observant Jew will study some Torah. The mitzvah of Torah study is one of the most important, and in an ideal world one should study it assiduously. For those who spend the bulk of their day working this is not possible, and so they set aside time each evening and/or morning for the purpose of study. A set of prayers is

⁸ Umansky, 'Spiritual Expressions', 265-6.

⁹ Male roles in the domestic context should also be examined, though this lies outside the scope of this thesis.

¹⁰ Most books about (Orthodox) Judaism intended for a Jewish but non-practising or a non-Jewish audience are written by men, who naturally draw on their own experience but do not realize it is shaped by gender.

recited before going to bed. [...] An abridged version of these bedtime prayers are recited by children, and most parents make a point of teaching it to them at an early age. [...] The first words uttered upon waking are a short prayer of thanksgiving to God for restoring our soul [...] Morning prayers, known as *shaharit* in Hebrew, are the most lengthy of all the daily prayers, taking a little under an hour to recite. [...] these should ideally be recited along with a quorum at the synagogue. [...] One of the noticeable characteristics of morning prayer is that male worshippers over the age of thirteen are required to wear *tefillin* [...] many will also be wrapped in a *tallit* prayer shawl [...] After morning prayers most people will rush off to work, while some may remain behind for a while studying some Torah before starting the day. [...] Most challenging for those at work [is] the afternoon prayer, or *mincha*. [...] Travelling presents its own challenges, as one must remember to factor in *mincha*.¹¹

This is an exclusively androcentric account, with women and children only visible in a passing reference to ‘parents’ teaching children bedtime prayers. Formal prayer with a *minyan*, Torah study, and the wearing of *tefillin* and *talit* are all examples of positive timebound commandments,¹² the category of *mitsvot* from which women are exempt (and in the case of *talit* and *tefillin*, very strongly discouraged from performing); few Orthodox women attend synagogue on weekdays. In spite of the fact that Orthodoxy elevates the religious significance of the home, it appears in this account as a place to eat and sleep in between the significant activities of prayer and Torah study, (ideally) located in the synagogue. Even activities defined by Orthodoxy as the supreme religious privilege of women, such as childcare and the preparation of kosher food, remain invisible in this account (let alone women’s experience of prayer and Torah study). In spite of Orthodox apologetics justifying women’s exclusion from central rituals by asserting that they are ‘equal but different’, women’s religious experience is largely invisible to Orthodox men and only mentioned or given theological support when it needs to be defended to the external world.

The author’s wife’s day is quite different:

¹¹ To protect the author’s and his wife’s identities, I have omitted the reference for this passage.

¹² *Tefilin*, ‘phylacteries’, are small leather boxes containing biblical texts, worn on weekdays on the head and arm; a *talit* is a prayer shawl with *tsitsit*, ritual fringes, on its four corners.

As soon as I feel the impetus to jump out of bed my lips mouth the words of ‘Modeh Ani’, thanking G-d¹³ for another day. [...] I begin my morning with a shower, followed by ritual washing to purify my hands, symbolizing the transition from an unconscious state of sleep to a state of physical alertness and spiritual awakening. [...] I wake my kids up and listen to my youngest child recite ‘Modeh Ani’. I enter the kitchen and repeat the ritual washing, this time followed by several morning blessings [...] Breakfast is generally a multi-tasking affair, eating while glancing at headline news, getting food out of the freezer for dinner or preparing a batch of dough that I will later bake into Challah, the traditional loaves for the Sabbath. I try to carve out some time for the traditional morning prayers before I leave for work. If I am taking the train into town, I will take along a pocket size prayer book and recite the morning prayer during the journey. [...] During my work day I often refer to Jewish values in conversation with colleagues and use Jewish ethics to guide me in making choices. [...] When the evening meal is over, my children and husband clear up and I spend some time reading or studying in preparation for a Jewish class I teach. By the time I get to bed I am rather tired and my bedtime ‘Shema’ prayer is punctuated with several yawns.¹⁴

While prayer is centrally important in this account, it is not the structure around which the day is organized, but is rather adapted to the demands of running a household, caring for a family, and working, and is intertwined with everyday activities such as showering and travelling. Torah study is linked to teaching, rather than presented as an end in itself, and activity is located in the home and the workplace, with no mention of the synagogue or the (male) social group that inhabits it—it is as invisible in this account as women’s daily experience is in the first.

Research aims

It is in the context of this double invisibility of Orthodox women—invisible both to Jewish men, and to the outside world—that I will explore their religious lives, focusing on three principal questions:

1. What do Orthodox women actually do, as opposed to descriptions in standard introductions to Jewish life, and to what rabbis and members of the male elite prescribe for women? How do women understand their practices?

¹³ Many Orthodox Jews extend the prohibition on writing God’s name in full in a non-sacred context, originally limited to Hebrew names and epithets of God, to English names and epithets.

¹⁴ Account supplied at my request by the wife of the author of the ‘male’ passage cited previously.

2. Are the variations within contemporary British Orthodoxy paralleled by variations in the practices, beliefs, and worldviews of Orthodox women, and if so, what factors shape these differences?

3. Is there any space for women's creativity and agency in Orthodox life, and if so, how do the constraints and opportunities inherent in a patriarchal religious system shape them?

Scope of the study

Few Orthodox Jewish women's practices—both communal rituals, such as those described in the two scenes above and examined in Chapters 3 and 4 below, but also many individual or domestic practices, as described in Chapters 5 and 6—appear in standard works on Judaism. These focus instead on a restricted definition of the woman's role in the home, especially the three 'women's *mitsvot*' of separating the first portion of dough when baking bread ([*hafrashat*] *halah*),¹⁵ observing the regulations of the ritual purity system (*taharat hamishpahah*),¹⁶ and lighting sabbath (and festival) candles (*hadlakat ner*).¹⁷ This set of commandments was associated with women as early as the first centuries of the Common Era, and by the mediaeval period had become the focus of rabbinic writings on women's religious duties: Chava Weissler notes that 'Ashkenazic sources sometimes conveyed the impression that these three duties were the only ones women had been commanded to perform.'¹⁸ The three commandments still feature prominently in Orthodox accounts

¹⁵ Lit. '[separating] dough'. Prescribed in Num. 15: 19-21. The dough was originally given to the priests (*kohanim*) but is now wrapped, burnt, and disposed of. It is not actually a woman's commandment, but should be performed by any Jew who bakes bread using a certain minimum amount of flour.

¹⁶ Lit. 'family purity'. The ritual and sexual framework created by these laws constitutes a major dimension of an observant married woman's life. Jewish law mandates total abstinence from sex and physical separation for married couples during the woman's menstruation and the following week; this period of ritual impurity (*tumah*) is concluded by the woman's immersion in a *mikveh*, after which sexual relations may be resumed. Although men are obviously affected by this (and may voluntarily visit the *mikveh* before major festivals), *mikveh* is mandatory for married women and has greater impact on their lives.

¹⁷ Lit. 'lighting the lamp'. This rabbinic (rather than biblical) commandment is incumbent upon each household, not specifically on each woman; men must light sabbath and festival candles if they live on their own or if the household's women are not present. Mainstream practice is for the mother to light candles, though under the influence of hasidic ideas widely promoted by Lubavitch (Habad) hasidism, many unmarried girls light their own candles too—an example of the 'seepage' of *haredi* customs into the non-*haredi* community.

¹⁸ See Weissler, *Voices*, 29, for a detailed account of the development of the 'three women's *mitsvot*'.

of Jewish women's role, as do other domestic activities such as keeping a kosher kitchen, preparing food for sabbath and festivals, and nurturing and educating children, plus a somewhat nebulous role in maintaining the home's Jewish character.¹⁹

Notwithstanding this valorization of the exclusively domestic role of women, and its characterization as 'the natural order of things', during research in London I discovered several examples of new communal religious activities organized by women, in addition to the high-profile women's *tefilah* [prayer] groups (WTGs) of which I was already aware:²⁰ *berakhah* parties, *halah* parties, *tehilim* (psalms) groups, Rosh Hodesh (New Moon) groups, *ahavat yisra'el* ('love of Israel') groups, *gemahs* (loan organizations). Almost all have been completely undocumented, apart from an occasional feature in the American Jewish and Israeli press covering parallel phenomena in those countries. Indeed, many members of London's Orthodox Jewish community, both male and female, are unaware of their existence.²¹ There was also a wide variety of women's Jewish study classes.

It became clear that the stereotypes derived from standard descriptions of women's practices in the domestic and individual sphere omit many widespread customs and practices, often characterized as 'superstitions' (even by those who practise them), although they form an integral and meaningful part of many women's religious lives. Responses from 100 women who completed a questionnaire on these practices revealed both ancient customs documented in talmudic sources and recent pietistic practices,²² often imported by younger women after studying at Israeli seminaries. Women understood them as embodying their role as protectors of the family and community, and often felt empowered by them, though some made a sharp distinction between 'halakhic practices' and 'superstitions', which they regarded as

¹⁹ See Ch. 5 for discussion of women's experience of these three commandments.

²⁰ See Ch. 4.

²¹ For instance, neither of the two hasidic women from Stamford Hill nor the retired United Synagogue rabbi whom I interviewed had heard of *berakhah* parties.

²² I class as 'pietistic' practices that consist of culturally defined virtuous activity, such as prayer or particularly stringent performance of commandments, designed to please God and accumulate merit, e.g. praying for 40 days at the Western Wall. Non-pietistic practices tend to be more mechanical and often more prophylactic in character, e.g. not giving a knife as a present for fear it will 'cut' the friendship. See Ch. 6.

trivial and perhaps even harmful.²³ Both these practices and communal expressions of Orthodox women's religiosity are frequently denigrated or discounted by Orthodox men, paralleling the lack of scholarly interest in women's religious activities and beliefs until recent years;²⁴ as far as I am aware, almost no studies of these phenomena have been carried out among British Jews.²⁵ As the sociologist Linda Woodhead has noted:

The tendency to render male practice normative in understandings of what counts as religious is also evident in deep sociological assumptions about what counts as sacred, as ritual, as scripture, as belief, as religious practice, as a religious professional, a religious organisation, and so on.²⁶

Study of this rich world of Orthodox women's communal and individual practice highlights crucial questions of women's agency, self-understanding, and creativity in a patriarchal society—issues that are far less central in other Jewish denominations, which promote egalitarianism in ritual and leadership (though not always achieving it in practice).

My research thus focuses principally on Orthodox women, and examines the variation within this category. Although both *haredi* and non-*haredi* women are usually lumped together as 'Orthodox', analysis of their different attitudes to, and practice within, religious life throws light on the nature of the Orthodox Jewish community in Britain, the competing forces of polarization and rapprochement that are shaping it, and the range of possible responses to pressures from within and outside the community. From my research findings, I will suggest that, rather than a simple *haredi*/non-*haredi* dichotomy, there are actually three principal groups of Orthodox women: *haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist or identitarian, which

²³ See Ch. 6.

²⁴ See below for discussion of recent studies on Jewish women's religious lives in Israel and America.

²⁵ Important information on women's perceptions of their religious opportunities in the British Jewish community appears in two reports: Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community* (henceforth 'the Preston Report') and Preston *et al.*, *Connection, Continuity, and Community* (henceforth 'the Women's Review'; see Ch. 2). Berkovic, *Under My Hat*, provides a vivid and critical account of being an Orthodox woman in Britain from a Modern Orthodox perspective. Naomi Alderman's novel *Disobedience* (2006) describes female alienation in the London Orthodox community. The only academic study of British Jewish women's religious lives of which I am aware is Cousineau, 'Domestication of Urban Jewish Space'.

²⁶ Woodhead, 'Gender Differences', 34.

do not necessarily coincide with institutional boundaries such as the Orthodox synagogue organizations.²⁷

Literature review and theoretical basis

Several types of literature proved relevant to my research: historical analyses of Jewish women's lives; ethnographic investigations of Jewish women in various locations and contexts, conducted during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; works in the fields of anthropology, religious studies, and feminist analysis that examine and critique approaches to the study of ritual and women's experience of religion.

1. Historical studies

In recent years much work has been done in retrieving Jewish women's history, voices, and experiences from the male-produced and male-dominated texts and records of the past.²⁸ New analyses of both familiar and obscure textual sources have dispelled some of the invisibility of Jewish women's lives, and in some cases glimpses of women's religious practice, beliefs, and understanding of their roles can be gleaned.²⁹ It is impossible to present even a brief survey of this research here, but in order to demonstrate their relevance to my research, two examples of historical studies will be described, illustrating their contribution to our knowledge of Jewish women's religious lives and the way in which they sometimes differed from those of men, in practice and outlook.

The first example—Shaye Cohen's discussion of mediaeval women's purity practices—illustrates differences in men's and women's understanding of women's ritual practice and the resulting conflict over which interpretation was authoritative, revealing the gendered hierarchy of power, knowledge, and interpretation, even in quintessentially female rituals, and giving historical depth to the phenomenon of alternative and specifically female understandings of religious practice and meaning that is one of the most significant features of my research. The second example—

²⁷ See below, Ch. 2, section on the British Jewish landscape.

²⁸ See Baskin (ed.), *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*; Goldin, *Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages*; Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*; Kaplan and Moore, *Gender and Jewish History*.

²⁹ e.g. Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, ch. 7.

Chava Weissler's study of *tkhines*, Ashkenazi women's Yiddish prayers, of the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries—opens a window on women's perception of their central religious role in the domestic sphere and its importance, paralleled by the outlook of many of my informants.

In his article 'Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of "Incorrect" Purification Practices', Cohen used four rabbinic responsa to explore mediaeval Jewish women's practice and understanding of the laws and rituals of *nidah*.³⁰ Noting that the laws recorded in halakhic texts were devised and formulated by men, hiding the women's perspective from our view, he suggests that 'When the rabbis tell us that women were not doing what they were supposed to be doing, they give us a brief glimpse at the religious lives [...] of Jewish women.' The texts reveal that women did take the purification process very seriously, but did not always follow the rabbinically prescribed procedure, maintaining their own rituals. Women in Ashkenaz (France-Germany) had the custom of bathing at the end of their menstrual period, before waiting for the rabbinically-ordained seven 'white' days (*yemei libun*) and then immersing in a *mikveh*, a practice which the rabbis felt 'slighted' the bath taken immediately before immersion. Women in Spain and the Byzantine empire also observed the *libun* days, but washed in baths rather than immersing in a *mikveh* as a purificatory ritual; and Egyptian women disregarded the *libun* days altogether, and had themselves sprinkled with water at the end of their menstrual period instead of using a *mikveh*. The women's responses to rabbinic criticism, preserved in some of these texts, show that they 'thought of themselves as righteous and of their customs as legitimate. Their piety was no less sincere and real than that of their rabbinic opponents.'³¹ Cohen identifies the tension inherent in the rabbinic struggle for authority over ritual practices, and the women's subversion of that authority and assumption of agency:

On the rabbinic side, polemic against 'incorrect' or 'heretical' practices was a political statement, an assertion of power. Menstrual practices were the preserve of women, taught by mother to daughter and woman to woman and observed in privacy, but even here (male) rabbinic authority was to be supreme. Women's traditions were wrong if they conflicted with the norms

³⁰ Part of the 'family purity' regulations mentioned above, n. 16.

³¹ S. Cohen, 'Purity, Piety, and Polemic', 433.

established by the (male) rabbis. Women must consult rabbis if they are to know what to do. [...] Knowledge was power; ignorant women were powerless to resist rabbinic authority. The women of Byzantium and Egypt, however, were neither ignorant nor powerless.³²

My research revealed similar instances in which women's Passover cleaning practices and *nidah* rituals, often learnt mimetically from their mothers, did not conform to rabbinically-prescribed procedures. In similar vein, informants also complained that certain aspects of meat preparation had been almost totally removed from the domestic sphere and assigned to (male) butchers 'because the rabbis don't trust women'.³³ A less tense site of confrontation involves types of interpretation and assignments of meaning that differ from standard rabbinic understandings, for instance in interpretation of the significance of cemetery visits.³⁴ Although historical evidence of such divergences in practice and interpretation is scanty, I suggest that it is sufficient to support the existence of similar parallel, but largely invisible, patterns of religious practice and thought among women that have persisted alongside the well-documented and 'normative' elite male tradition—both drawing from it and occasionally resisting or ignoring it—throughout Jewish history.

In *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, Chava Weissler identified

five types of relations between women's religion and elite male religion: (1) a valorization of women's separate sphere; (2) rituals created by women expressing some sort of women's religious culture; (3) a distancing of women from supposedly 'desirable' male activities; (4) an appropriation and transformation of motifs from scholarly culture; and (5) a direct challenge to elite, male gender definitions.³⁵

Although expressed in very different ways from the *tkhines* investigated by Weissler, similar relationships can be seen between the religious lives of London's Orthodox women and the associated elite male religion. Like Weissler's women, my informants—*haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist—placed great emphasis on the sanctity and importance of their role as nurturers and protectors of family and

³² Ibid., 433-4.

³³ See Ch. 5, section on *kashrut*.

³⁴ See Ch. 5.

³⁵ Weissler, *Voices*, 177.

community life, often asserting this was more important than men's normative role as performers of communal rituals and Torah study (Weissler's first type). Just as the female author of a *tkhine* could imagine herself as a counterpart of the high priest lighting the Temple menorah when she lit sabbath candles,³⁶ Shirley Daniels, a young Modern Orthodox mother, saw herself as linked to and reproducing the act of the biblical matriarch Sarah when she performed the same ritual, and Sarah Segal, a young hasidic mother, envisioned herself as the 'interior minister' of her home, complementing her husband's role as 'foreign minister', dealing with the world outside.³⁷ In terms of Weissler's second type, the traces of women's rituals and religious culture visible in the *tkhines*, such as using wicks with which graves had been measured to make candles for the synagogue, are closely paralleled by recently developed women's communal rituals, particularly prominent in the *haredi* sector, such as *berakhah* parties, *halah* parties, and *tehilim* groups, which are increasingly creating a separate women's religious culture.³⁸ Another aspect of this can be seen in the maintenance of traditional customs and the invention of new, pietistic practices in the domestic sphere.³⁹ Weissler's fifth type, 'a direct challenge to elite, male gender definitions', exemplified by Leah Horowitz's *tkhine* asserting that women's prayer can bring redemption, finds an echo not only in *haredi* women's claims of 'power' in new rituals such as *berakhah* parties, but also in Modern Orthodox women's group performance of traditionally male rituals (such as formal prayers and Megillah readings), as well as in the recent rise of partnership *minyanim*—though this last example runs counter to the trend of creating a completely separate women's religious sphere.⁴⁰

Weissler's third and fourth categories of relationship are less applicable to the modern context. Weissler herself is ambiguous about her third type, that of 'distanced participation': she begins by discussing a *tkhine* that articulates a gender-based hierarchy between men, expert in *kabalah*, and women, who cannot aspire to such knowledge and hence remain marginal, but then observes that the *tkhine* is itself an adaptation of a male-authored Hebrew prayer designed for unlearned men. In

³⁶ Ibid., 96-103.

³⁷ See Ch. 5.

³⁸ See Ch. 4.

³⁹ See Ch. 6.

⁴⁰ This challenge to traditional gender roles is precisely why these initiatives are not welcomed or encouraged by male religious authorities; see Ch. 4.

addition, it embodies a male hierarchical attitude that places kabbalistic knowledge at the apex of spirituality.⁴¹ Weissler wonders if asking whether women were excluded from such knowledge simply perpetuates a male-based scale of religious value, a point raised at the beginning of this chapter, where it was argued that neither the ‘normative’ male perspective nor a ‘mirror image’ female perspective provides an appropriate basis for analysis of women’s (or indeed men’s) religious lives. I will attempt to examine women’s activity in both communal and domestic spheres, without assuming the priority of either, and to investigate the different types of creativity and agency possible in both.

The fourth type identified by Weissler consists of the appropriation and transformation of motifs or concepts from elite male culture, of which I found little or no evidence. British Jewish women have written no religious material and very little on their own experience of religion.⁴² Such voices are rarely heard, appearing mainly in letters to the *Jewish Chronicle* and *Jewish Tribune*, and in material presented in the Preston Report and the Women’s Review; in none of these, nor in interviews I conducted, was there much evidence of transformation of elite concepts. The only exception is the prevalence of the basic kabbalistic concept that prayer and ritual action can be theurgically effective, slightly adapted to assert that women’s prayer and action is particularly powerful and redemptive. The relatively low level of Orthodox women’s Jewish education in Britain is another contributing factor: few women have studied classical Jewish texts, even in translation.

The similarity of modern women’s strategies to some of those identified by Weissler suggests that the innovations in ritual and practice, and the ‘women’s customs’ so visible in my research, do not represent a break with the past. Rather, they constitute an extension and adaptation of patterns that Jewish women have used for centuries to exert agency in creative ways within the constraints of a male-dominated system, thereby simultaneously subverting and reinforcing the system, and creating specifically female patterns of religious self-expression.

⁴¹ Weissler, *Voices*, 180-2.

⁴² See above, n. 25. There are also a few personal memoirs or pamphlets, such as Hubert, *Jewish Woman’s Handbook*, a short, unique attempt by an older woman with no formal Jewish education to articulate the essence of her religious life, focusing on the sabbath, festivals, and food preparation.

2. Ethnographic studies

Though little has been written on modern Jewish women in Britain, there are several valuable studies of Jewish women elsewhere, and four of these proved particularly useful in developing concepts and elaborating approaches for my research, besides providing comparative material: Barbara Myerhoff's classic *Number Our Days*, a study of elderly Jews of East European origin in California; Susan Starr Sered's *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*; Tamar El-Or's *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and their World*, which examines hasidic women in Israel, with a focus on education; and Ayala Fader's *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*, which emphasizes language and children's socialization. These have been a fruitful source of ideas, even though they reflect very different populations (elderly or hasidic) and locations (Israel and the USA) from those I have been studying.

Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* explores the lives of both men and women in their 70s and 80s, as they struggled to create a meaningful Jewish culture, adapted from their Eastern European childhoods and experiences of immigration to the United States, and constrained by the physical, financial, and familial problems of old age. It includes a perceptive chapter (7) on women, assessing why they were more successful in coping with the process of ageing than their male counterparts, and examining their attitude to religion. Rachel, one of the most articulate informants, came up with the term 'domestic religion' to describe women's religious lives in contrast to those of men, noting that

the boys [...] knew what the sacred words meant so they could argue and doubt. But with us girls, we couldn't doubt because what we knew came without understanding. These things were injected into you in childhood and chained together with that beautiful grandmother, so ever since infancy you can't know life without it. The boys in cheder [religion school] could learn the words and forget them, but in this domestic religion, you could never get rid of it.⁴³

⁴³ Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 235.

Myerhoff identified this idea of ‘domestic religion’, acquired in a mimetic mode,⁴⁴ and still a powerful and emotional element in the lives of these elderly people (even though they were not generally observant or ‘Orthodox’), with Robert Redfield’s concept of the ‘little tradition’, which he contrasted with a ‘great tradition’ in his 1956 work *Peasant Society and Culture*. Redfield saw the ‘great tradition’ of a culture (or religion) as the central, often urban-based and written tradition, formulated and replicated by elite men, while the ‘little tradition’ represented the village version of the ‘great tradition’, adapted and often influenced by pre-existing traditions at the local level. He regarded the two as interdependent, but characterized the ‘great tradition’ as central and hierarchically superior, with the ‘little tradition’ as marginal and lower. Although this model was developed for peasant societies, Myerhoff adapted it to her material, characterizing the ‘little tradition’ as ‘a local, folk expression of a group’s beliefs; unsystematized, not elaborately idealized, it is an oral tradition practiced constantly and often unconsciously by ordinary people’,⁴⁵ in contrast to the ‘great tradition’ represented by the text-based studies of the elite. She identified the ‘domestic religion’ characteristic of her informants, especially the women, with the ‘little tradition’, while reserving a (low) level of participation in the ‘great tradition’ for the men, who had some degree of literacy in Hebrew and Torah study—an educational advantage denied to the women.

However, while this distinction has some attractions, it raises several problems, as did Redfield’s original pair of concepts.⁴⁶ In particular, the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the two ‘traditions’ seems unfounded; in what sense can a ‘tradition’ participated in by only a very small elite be understood as superior to and determinative of a ‘tradition’ shared by the majority of members of a culture or religion? This is very similar to the problematic assumption that a male perspective on religion is normative, while a female one is marginal and derivative. In addition, men’s participation in the ‘little tradition’ is ignored, as is the nature of the relationship between the two types. Myerhoff’s observation of two interrelated modalities of religious life is still useful, however, if we see them in a horizontally-

⁴⁴ See Soloveitchik, ‘Rupture and Reconstruction’, who identifies the loss of mimetic learning and socialization and its replacement by text-based learning as a major factor in changes in Orthodoxy in modern times, especially its ‘swing to the right’. Though Soloveitchik does not note this, mimetic learning is still common among women, surviving alongside the rise of text-based learning.

⁴⁵ Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 256.

⁴⁶ See Obeyesekere, ‘The Great Tradition’ for a critique.

rather than vertically-ordered relationship, as two complementary and overlapping halves of a whole religious culture (even if one has been and continues to be under-documented).

Another valuable feature of Myerhoff's study is her identification of the tension between the two 'worldviews' held by her informants: as well as the childhood values and culture of their European *shtetl* background,⁴⁷ still of immense emotional and ethical significance, these elderly men and women held strong secular and socialist principles, which sometimes proved incompatible with the first set. An illustration can be seen in Myerhoff's account of religious services for the elderly held under the auspices of a group of younger, hasidic men, who had set up a cloth *mehitsah* (divider) between men and women. The old people objected violently to it—'This is out of the Old Country!', one exclaimed indignantly—and one woman tore the cloth down and threw it in the sea.⁴⁸ In spite of their deep emotional attachment to their *shtetl* origins, they were equally attached to liberal ideals of equality and progress, and frequently experienced and argued over clashes between the two sets of values. This type of attachment to two, often incompatible, sets of values and expectations is very characteristic of the traditionalist and Modern Orthodox women in my study, though much less so of the *haredi* women, who tend to prioritize the Jewish worldview inculcated by both family and education.⁴⁹ Non-*haredi* women are often acutely conscious of this tension, like Stella James, who straddles the traditionalist and Modern Orthodox categories:

My education and my outlook has very much been determined by the western tradition, by Enlightenment philosophy, by things like that, and all I know about the Jewish way of thinking, the Jewish tradition, is what I've learned [at London School of Jewish Studies], so I'm very *westernized* in my thinking, and it doesn't always sit easily with me, the combination of the two things. I find that quite difficult.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ A *shtetl* (Yiddish: 'small town') refers to the small, often largely Jewish towns in Eastern Europe.

⁴⁸ Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 269-70.

⁴⁹ This by no means implies that they are untouched by trends in wider society, such as feminism. See Morris, 'Agents or Victims?' for an analysis of hasidic women's location in feminist studies and an appraisal of how they display agency—a feminist ideal—specifically to oppose feminism and promote their non-liberal ideology.

⁵⁰ For a similar consciousness and an examination of tension between Western feminist principles and Modern Orthodoxy, see Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, ch. 1.

In contrast, more traditionalist women tended to cope with the tension either by ‘compartmentalizing’ their religious lives and leaving their secular values outside, or by simply ignoring aspects of religious life that clashed with their Western liberal and at least partly feminist worldview.⁵¹ Modern Orthodox women often reacted to the tension by trying to change aspects of their religious lives, such as participation in standard communal rituals, in order to accommodate both worldviews—with varying degrees of success. Previous research has focused on hasidic communities, with the result that the complexities of religious life for non-*haredi* Orthodox women have been overlooked; this is one of the areas in which my research makes a contribution.

Susan Sered’s *Women as Ritual Experts*, documenting elderly Sefardi women in Jerusalem, also uses the concept of ‘domestic religion’ (with specific reference to Myerhoff)⁵² and the ‘great and little tradition’ idea, though she characterizes the two traditions as the halakhic system, identified with men, and the ‘extra-halakhic’ system, identified with women. While subject to the same criticism as Myerhoff,⁵³ Sered introduces the important observation that the power relations between the ‘two traditions’ are not symmetrical; even if we view these two ends of the tradition spectrum as horizontally rather than hierarchically arranged (in etic terms), as suggested above, we must take account of the (emic) male view that they represent a hierarchy, and of the ways in which women negotiate with and work around with this system of power relations:

Within a system that defines male as normative, women frequently deviate from the norm. Within a system that is sexually segregated and in which the male world is defined as the official world, the content of the women’s world needs to be examined by a different set of tools. [The interesting question] is not whether a women’s brand of Judaism exists [...], but how the two religious systems (the male and female, and great and little, the *halachic* and extra-*halachic*) interact. [...] Within the context of male-oriented religion, women clearly find strategies for constructing a meaningful religious life. Women reinterpret, ignore, borrow, circumvent, and shift emphases. But perhaps the most effective strategy available to

⁵¹ Such as the ‘family purity’ regulations, ignored by many traditionalist women who see them as primitive and misogynistic, in spite of their halakhic importance; see Ch. 5.

⁵² Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 90-2.

⁵³ For instance, it ignores women’s compliance with and relationship to the halakhic system that applies to all Jews, regardless of its formation and control by a male elite.

women is to use the forms of the great tradition to sacralize their own, female life experiences.⁵⁴

My research reveals ample evidence of all these techniques and more, including the creation of new rituals. When prohibitions on lighting candles at sacred tombs prevented Sered's informants from practising a beloved ritual, they improvised a new one by throwing unlit candles through railings at the tomb. Sered describes this as 'a rather typical instance of people responding to a novel situation through creating a ritual that refers to old situations', which would apply equally to the new *berakhah* and *halah* parties described below, and to the women-only readings of the books of Esther, Ruth, and Lamentations in the Modern Orthodox sector.⁵⁵ Responding to changing concepts of women's roles and potential in non-Jewish society, women in the Orthodox world work within the constraints of the male-dominated system to create spaces and opportunities within which their voices are heard and their spiritual self-development promoted, while avoiding head-on conflict (though not controversy) with the existing system.

Sered also emphasizes women's ability to sacralize the everyday and recast it as the most important sphere of Jewish activity:

Once we begin looking for religion within the profane world rather than outside of it, we begin to discover realms of religiosity that are not limited to those times, people, places, objects, and events that seem extraordinary; we begin to see religion as potentially interwoven with all other aspects of human existence. [...] in societies in which women are excluded from significant public or formal religious activities, they may become experts at sacralizing the everyday female sphere.⁵⁶

This too echoed my findings, and prompted me to listen carefully for women's own understandings of their actions: one mother told me of the sacred significance of making a glass of carrot juice for her child,⁵⁷ while another woman described her food preparations for the sabbath when asked about the structure of her 'Jewish week'; other women spoke of the founding of *gemahs* (small organizations that lend baby equipment, sim cards, and other items) as religious acts in honour of deceased

⁵⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁵ See Ch. 4.

⁵⁶ Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 140.

⁵⁷ See Ch. 5.

parents.⁵⁸ Several women, particularly but not exclusively from the *haredi* sector, found difficulty in separating out the ‘Jewish’ or ‘religious’ parts of their lives, or objected to the idea,⁵⁹ since they experienced their lives as holistic and sacred rather than compartmentalized into Jewish/non-Jewish or religious/secular components: Flora Rendberg observed that ‘being Jewish is everywhere in my life. It’s not something I only take out on Fridays and Saturdays.’⁶⁰

Educated and Ignorant, by Tamar El-Or, while a fine study in its own right of Gur hasidic women in a neighbourhood near Tel Aviv, has narrower relevance for my research. The author focused on the paradox of the Gur ideal of educating women to be ignorant, and the way in which this serves as a paradigm for the ‘coping techniques’ used by the *haredi* world to negotiate the constant paradoxes engendered by living in a separate society that is simultaneously part of modern Israel.

El-Or’s examination of the aims and methods of women’s education in the *haredi* world, and its success in the maintenance and reproduction of social values, are directly relevant to my investigation of the educational opportunities available to Jewish women in London, which if anything are more limited in range than those available to Gur women in Israel.⁶¹ El-Or’s analysis of how this type of education keeps women ignorant of the textual halakhic tradition that constitutes the power and status base of rabbis and learned men, while inculcating ‘appropriate’ character and behavioural traits such as modesty and good parenting skills, provides a good interpretative framework for the understanding of the nature of most Orthodox women’s classes provided by outreach organizations, *haredi* (and some United) synagogues, and private teachers in London. Her study also reinforces the distinction noted above between men’s and women’s experience of religion and illustrates some of the techniques by which this distinction is maintained.

⁵⁸ See Ch. 4.

⁵⁹ Often in reaction to my standard question: ‘How is your Jewish week structured?’.

⁶⁰ For an illuminating cross-denominational account of the sacralization of daily life in America, see Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, esp. ch. 4, which contains many parallels to my findings.

⁶¹ Except for classes offered by London School of Jewish Studies, a Modern Orthodox institution, or by a few Modern Orthodox educators, and Lubavitch girls’ schools, which offer some access to classical Jewish texts, though not at the same level as for boys.

Both as a teacher and a participant in women's classes, I noticed a trend documented by El-Or: 'Women's education generates an ongoing translation of complex problems into simple actions. It levels questions of morality, faith, and justice into instructions for action in daily life.'⁶² Not only did the (female) teachers in several classes I attended adopt this strategy, but even in classes taught by Modern Orthodox rabbis focusing on theological or methodological issues such as talmudic dialectic, women often accomplished this transformation themselves by abandoning abstract or theoretical discussion in favour of inquiring about the practical implications of a text, such as cleaning for Passover—sometimes to the rabbi's dismay. My personal experience as a teacher has taught me that many Orthodox women are reluctant to learn reading skills that would enable them to engage with classical rabbinic texts in an independent fashion—an ability that is very highly regarded in male accounts of desirable religious activity. While this can be interpreted as women's culturally-determined preference for teaching styles and subject matter with which they are more familiar and comfortable,⁶³ perhaps it is also an indication of the very different religious priorities held by women, as suggested by Myerhoff's and Sered's studies. To women who see their role as nurturers of family and community as central and meaningful, abstract halakhic or theological discussion may seem trivial and irrelevant when compared to the very real concerns of daily life—a point that El-Or does not discuss, though she notes that the women she studied are by no means ignorant, even if it suits their menfolk's stereotypes to think they are.

The last ethnography I will discuss is Ayala Fader's *Mitzvah Girls*, which examines the upbringing and socialization of Bobover and other hasidic girls in Brooklyn. Her study, based on a language socialization approach, investigates 'everyday talk between women and children' to reveal 'an alternative religious modernity', in which women are active in the secular world while simultaneously critiquing and adapting it, using the 'self-discipline that is learned through Jewish religious practice' to achieve 'real freedom, progress, and self-actualization', as they define these.⁶⁴ Fader notes the recent development of more sophisticated attitudes to the study of women from 'nonliberal' religions: she cites Talal Asad's work revealing Western concepts

⁶² El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*, 90.

⁶³ See Belenky *et al.*, *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

⁶⁴ Fader, *Mitzvah Girls*, 3.

of ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ as themselves a product of Western modernity, as well as recent ethnographic work on evangelical Christian women in North and Latin America that focuses on ‘the unexpectedly progressive outcomes of women’s increasing involvement in religion’, including their reinterpretation of secular Western feminism in terms of their own religious aims.⁶⁵ Her own study focuses on the everyday ‘in order to account for the ways that nonliberal women’s lives and desires transgress easy distinctions between the religious and the secular’,⁶⁶ a theme that emerges from my own research. Fader starts from a sociolinguistic perspective, but widens this to include ‘broader relationships between semiotic registers such as language, clothing, hairstyles, and comportment’, in order to examine how hasidic women and girls use speech and embodied practice to forge bridges ‘between modernity and tradition, the secular and the religious, cosmopolitanism and enclavism’: a striking example is her observation that hasidic women ‘regularly read popular North American parenting books’, but apply their methods ‘to cultivate nonliberal Hasidic conceptions of the self [...] that simultaneously draw on Hasidic religious philosophy regarding the soul, good, evil, and gender’.⁶⁷ Her conclusions are particularly valuable for analysis of the *haredi* women I encountered, but can also be adapted to examine how non-*haredi* Orthodox women make their own distinctive bridges between the two overlapping worldviews—liberal Western and Jewish—that shape their lives.

These four ethnographies have provided several useful concepts and lines of approach: a horizontally-aligned model of men’s and women’s separate, though overlapping, religious lives; the power differential between these interrelated spheres and the ways in which women negotiate, compensate for, reinterpret, and occasionally resist these inequalities in power; the nature and management of the tension between Jewish and Western liberal worldviews in the religious lives of Orthodox women; women’s sacralization of the everyday; the construction of ‘alternative religious modernities’ by means of education and socialization; and the problematic nature of classic Western dichotomies such as ‘religious/secular’ or

⁶⁵ See also Morris, ‘Agents or Victims?’.

⁶⁶ Fader, *Mitzvah Girls*, 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

‘magic/rational’. All these have been taken up, explored, and incorporated in the research documented below.

3. Anthropology, religious studies, and feminist analysis

Recent publications in anthropology and religious studies, many influenced by feminist theory, have critiqued many previously unexamined assumptions and stereotypes underlying earlier research, especially that documenting religion, women, and the combination of the two.⁶⁸ I will examine three works of particular relevance to my research: Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), on the theory of ritual; Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), an analysis of Egyptian women of the Islamic Revival that is both based on and enhances a critique of secular-liberal (including feminist) conceptions of women’s agency and autonomy; and Bonnie Morris’ important, though under-appreciated, article ‘Agents or Victims of Religious Ideology? Approaches to Locating Hasidic Women in Feminist Studies’, which tackles some of the same issues as Mahmood, but comes to different conclusions.

In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell describes ritualization as ‘first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations’.⁶⁹ She builds upon Michel Foucault’s characterization of power as ‘a mode of action’ that seeks ‘to structure the possible field of action of others’,⁷⁰ and his observation that ‘power is exercised over free subjects and only so far as they are free’. This leads her to note that ‘[t]he deployment of ritualization, consciously or unconsciously, is the deployment of a particular construction of power relationships, a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance.’⁷¹ In contrast to earlier theorists, such as Steven Lukes and Abner Cohen, who view power in terms of sovereignty and strategies of control, Foucault’s more diffuse account of power, not as founded on a basis of coercion but as essentially embodied in a web of relationships, provides a better understanding of this

⁶⁸ See Fader, *Mitzvah Girls*, 3-7 for a brief overview, as well as Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, 5-14, 17-22, for evaluation of key anthropological and feminist writings on this.

⁶⁹ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 197.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 200, quoting Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

dimension of ritual. However, Bell would advance beyond Foucault's conception of power relationships as inevitably containing an element of resistance, a 'means of escape or possible flight',⁷² to modulate this dichotomous view ('power – resistance') with a more nuanced approach that examines the interplay and intensity of elements such as consent, empowerment, appropriation, negotiation, resistance, and coercion that continuously shape every ritual.⁷³ She argues for a more contextualized analysis of ritual: 'Ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies.'⁷⁴

Such a set of complex power relationships is evident in the standard services held in Orthodox synagogues in London; equally, the establishment of women-only versions of these services, whether women's *tefilah* groups or Megillah readings, sets up an alternative set of relationships.⁷⁵ Yet another set of such relationships is created by the completely new rituals of the *berakhah* and *halah* parties. When women's rituals are viewed in these terms, it is not surprising that those (men) whose power is expressed in existing rituals find the women-only versions disturbing, undesirable, and potentially divisive. The presence of women, as a sector of the community, in the ladies' gallery in an Orthodox synagogue is consequently recoded as an essential part of the standard ritual, with accusations that women who attend WTGs are 'dividing the community'.

This might explain the Orthodox establishment's intolerance of the absence of women involved in a 'rival' ritual, in spite of ignoring their absence in other contexts. Individual attendance is not the issue here: as Chapter 3 notes, in most Orthodox communities, women do not arrive at the beginning of the service, frequently leave before the end, and if not present at all, their absence is not generally remarked upon. However, the concept of women attending a service that

⁷² Ibid., 201, quoting Foucault, 'The Subject and Power'.

⁷³ This calls to mind Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy', arguing that 'women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint ... of the *patriarchal bargain* of any given society'. Though originally developed within an economic context, this concept may be usefully applied to religion. See Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy'.

⁷⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 226.

⁷⁵ See Chs. 3 and 4 for discussion of synagogue and women's-only services respectively.

parallels the standard one is immediately challenging, and (in the eyes of the authorities) potentially subversive. This is demonstrated by the London Beth Din's insistence, when the Stanmore Women's Tefilah Group was allowed to take place in the synagogue after its eighteen-year 'exile', that its name be changed to the 'Women's Learning Experience', to avoid the implication that they were praying or holding a ritual comparable in any way to standard services.⁷⁶

A vivid example of 'a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance', as postulated by Bell, is illustrated here. On the other side of this relationship, the women involved in the WTGs are aware of the authorities' perception of their activities. In response they stress their desire for spiritual fulfilment (an unimpeachable aim), and their readiness to comply with the Beth Din's demands that they omit the central symbol of a standard service—the use of a Torah scroll—and the prayers that may only be said by a *minyan*, which synecdochically symbolizes the community. Far from desiring to seize power or to reverse the gender relationships embodied in Orthodox ritual,⁷⁷ they use every opportunity to obtain rabbinic approval, and decline to 'opt out' of the Orthodox community, often to their own disadvantage.⁷⁸

The interplay of consent, empowerment, appropriation, negotiation, resistance, and coercion is clearly visible here: acting within the constraints of a male-dominated community, the women seek to negotiate an expanded role within the system, rather than combat it. Hence, they do not claim to constitute and thereby redefine a *minyan*, but seek an opportunity to perform a central ritual in a way that does not directly confront the existing power relationships but creates a co-existing alternative. They

⁷⁶ See Ch. 4.

⁷⁷ Their opponents often accused them of 'wanting to be like men', and labelled them as 'feminists' (not a positive word in the Orthodox community), although very few of the women involved would have identified themselves as feminists. See letters to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, cited in Ch. 4, n. 33. For an analysis of antagonism to feminism in Modern Orthodoxy in spite of its enthusiastic integration of other aspects of Western liberalism, such as ethical principles, see Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, ch. 1.

⁷⁸ Though exit has its own price; see Reitman, 'On Exit', where she speaks of the 'socio-psychological' obstacles facing those who consider leaving minority communities: 'fear of ostracism by family, friends, associates and community [...] the loss of moral support and the sense of belonging and rootedness derived from community [...] change and the unknown [...] obstacles which stem from the fact that cultural membership can be pervasively defining of one's sense of self' (p. 195). I am indebted to Lindsay Simmonds for this reference. On social and other ties that impede exit from religious communities, see also Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 118.

do not doubt their right to agency but voluntarily shape that agency in terms of the wider male-dominated system, consenting to its authority.⁷⁹

Saba Mahmood, in *Politics and Piety*, has made an important point about understanding women's agency in male-dominated societies, and the pitfalls of reducing complex situations to a simple dichotomy:

What [earlier feminist studies] fail to problematize is the universality of the desire—central for progressive and liberal thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes—to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination. [...] their assumptions reflect a deeper tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project. [...] I question the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power. [...] In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.⁸⁰

Mahmood studied Egyptian Muslim women who seek to create 'a pious self' that does not conform to Western ideals, but her understanding of women's agency, at least in part, can be applied to Orthodox Jewish women's search for communal ritual expression and participation while accepting the patriarchal system within which they live. As she notes, 'the fact that discourses of piety and male superiority are ineluctably intertwined does not mean that we can assume that the women who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure male domination.'⁸¹ However, if women's agency cannot simply be equated with resistance, neither can it be assumed to preclude any relationship with resistance, especially in contexts where gender inequality structures and produces the religious system: when male religious authorities are the source and authenticators of the female 'pious self' and determine permissible practice, women's agency is inevitably limited by male-imposed boundaries.⁸² Apart from the many Modern

⁷⁹ Given the fact they can leave the community (though at a high social and personal cost), such consent is also an act of women's agency.

⁸⁰ Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, 10, 14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸² For discussion of the importance of radical feminist analysis of the creation and maintenance of patriarchal discourses (such as Dale Spender's work on language and Mary Daly's exploration of how

Orthodox women who openly express feelings of frustration and oppression at the boundaries placed on their religious expression and practice by male religious authorities, even the most conformist and submissive *haredi* woman is all too vulnerable to the effects of gender inequality in situations such as divorce, where her husband controls the process.⁸³ By downplaying the familial, social, and political context of such agency and its structural limits and emphasizing the autonomous nature of the construction of the self, Mahmood weakens her overall argument. As Sylvia Walby has observed, in some recent feminist analysis

There is a potential pluralisation of the competing standards against which equality may be assessed. The solution of proposing an equal valuation of different contributions is itself fraught with difficulties ... there is also sometimes a tendency towards the prioritisation of the analysis of difference over inequality. ... There has been a shift in interest from systems of power to that of agency.⁸⁴

I adopt Mahmood's non-dichotomous understanding of agency, together with a recognition that women's self-understandings do not necessarily map on to western liberal assumptions about the universal desire for freedom, but temper it with a more situated account of women's aspirations and self-understandings in a shifting web of power relations, as understood by Bell, and examined by Morris, to whose analysis of feminism in relation to hasidic women I now turn.

In her article 'Agents or Victims of Religious Ideology?', Morris compares feminism, which 'offers a broad range of secular, legal, political, and socioeconomic interpretations of women's status', with hasidism, which 'preserves an exclusively religious vision, wherein separate roles and expectations for male and female are divinely ordained laws'.⁸⁵ She notes that hasidic women, like other non-liberal

belief systems justify and normalize male domination of women), see Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, 100-01.

⁸³ Power to grant a Jewish divorce rests exclusively with the husband, a situation that has led to many cases of abuse of women who are refused divorces (*agunot*; sing. *agunah*). For an introduction to the 'agunah problem', see <http://www.jofa.org/Advocacy/Agunot_Overview>. Potential for male abuse of women, both physical and mental, is thus built into the Orthodox gender regime.

⁸⁴ Walby, *Future of Feminism*, 18, 23.

⁸⁵ Morris, 'Agents or Victims', 161.

religious women, have been largely ignored in feminist analysis because of their location at the intersectionality of ‘gender, ethnicity, and sect’. An analysis of Habad-Lubavitch hasidic women’s history of activism from the 1950s onwards leads her to conclude that far from being ‘victims’ of oppression, ‘Often it is the hasidic woman who actively promotes her own role and who serves as an advocate for the hasidic ideology of separate spheres’,⁸⁶ once again raising the question of why women (especially those in western societies where gender equality is largely perceived as desirable) would prefer to choose or remain in religious cultures that are inherently gender unequal. The account given by scholars such as Davidman and Ammerman emphasizes that in a period of rapidly changing ideas about gender roles, some women prefer to seek the security of divinely authenticated and traditional roles offered by strongly patriarchal religions,⁸⁷ such as Orthodox Judaism and fundamentalist Christianity. In contrast, Morris notes the influence of contemporary American feminism on Habad women, but emphasizes that they incorporate aspects of feminism that they found compelling while excluding others that do not complement their understanding of their role:

To the extent that the American feminist movement incited all women to discuss the burdens of housework and the lesser funding allocated to women’s institutions, Lubavitch women certainly joined in asking for recognition and assistance. But this was not equivalent to demanding fundamental *change* in the structure of hasidic sex roles. What emerges from [their] literature is certainly the kind of antifeminist rhetoric which impedes the location of hasidic women on the continuum of multicultural women’s studies. Birth control, abortion, secular college education, professional careers for women, female synagogue leadership, nonsexist toys, rock music, television, and short skirts received the same treatment ... as in comparable fundamentalist Christian rhetoric. However, an important distinction is that

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ See Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World*, an important study of American Jewish women’s return to religion in both Modern Orthodox and *haredi* contexts, and Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, a study of fundamentalist Christians, in which she describes the way in which members experience a nonliberal religious community as a ‘haven from modernity’(p. 211).

hasidic women's antifeminism was rooted in minority survival rather than the political pulpit.⁸⁸

She notes that, in addition to ideological views, their position as a minority that defines itself in opposition to the surrounding culture discourages their adoption of feminist positions (such as the advocacy of freeing women from male-dictated reproductive demands) that would lead to a decline in their numbers and viability as a group; they cannot afford to see themselves as oppressed by their own society. Nevertheless, while minority status and 'male authority and control often circumscribe female choice, women still retain options as ideological consumers. Religious sex-role assignments may, indeed, oppress all women as a class while still permitting individual women to attain power and status through the manipulation of the prescribed female role'.⁸⁹ By highlighting these intersectionalities of gender, ethnicity, and religion, Morris effectively issues feminist analysis with a challenge that resembles but goes further than that of Mahmood:

Where there is no white, Western, Protestant model of community, the feminist investigator cannot apply the same yardstick of criticism bred by the legacy of white, Western, Protestant feminism. The unique contribution of hasidic history to feminist studies concerns how gender roles may be manipulated to preserve traditionally patriarchal systems of belief. The Lubavitch woman activist who flies coast to coast with a full speaker's itinerary, lecturing other Jewish women on the virtues of modesty and domesticity, transforms the rules in order to defend them.⁹⁰

Like the women Mahmood and Morris studied, the *haredi* and Modern Orthodox women I encountered have a strong sense of agency, and like their Muslim counterparts, work around, or alongside, dominant modes of power, rather than against them; they do not oppose or resist the system but seek to express themselves

⁸⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 176.

and act within it, as noted above.⁹¹ This holds true in particular of *haredi* women, who share many similarities with the Muslim women discussed by Mahmood, especially in their acceptance of a divinely ordered system of ethical behaviour and commanded action that includes submission to men. However, Mahmood's account is less helpful in understanding the positions of non-*haredi* women; Morris' more subtle and contextualized account is of greater use here. Though accepting the Orthodox worldview on its own terms, as do *haredi* women, traditionalist women will sometimes respond to the conflicts it engenders with a secular-liberal worldview by simply ignoring religious demands and expectations that prove inconvenient. For them, change in ritual is deeply problematic, as it threatens their ethnically- rather than religiously-based identity; as with Morris' Habad women, survival as a minority is more important to them than their religious satisfaction or status within ritual. Indeed, they often vocally resist the efforts of Modern Orthodox women to challenge limitations and take a more active part in ritual, regarding such attempts as threatening their own Jewish identity. Unfortunately for Modern Orthodox women who seek new or expanded roles when faced with tensions between their two worldviews, the community's male power holders, like poststructuralist feminists, tend to react by reframing their actions as an expression of challenge, creating a dichotomy of submission (defined in terms of conformity to the idealized norm of female behaviour) and resistance (defined as any attempt to innovate in the field of ritual). Perhaps it would be more just to reposition 'resistance' as the stance adopted by *men* who seek to oppose and limit women's religious adaptation and creativity that responds to changing circumstances.

As suggested by Morris, London Orthodox Jewish women's position as members of a small minority is of immense importance; issues of identity and community affiliation and dependence are vital to them, and the very real risks associated with leaving the community, or losing its approval and recognition, shape women's religious choices in ways that are not applicable to members of a majority

⁹¹ Those women who come to regard the Orthodox world as hopelessly repressive and misogynistic usually react either by switching to another denomination or abandoning religious affiliation altogether.

religion/ethnic group.⁹² The Egyptian Muslim women studied by Mahmood do not experience the pressure felt by members of a minority to conform to their community's expectations in order to retain their membership and identity, and indeed to ensure the survival of their minority community.⁹³ Mahmood also does not fully examine the role of expectations, pressures, and rewards imposed or offered by the familial, religious, and social context within which women's lives are embedded.⁹⁴ These factors were immensely important to the Jewish women I interviewed, many of whose religious choices were shaped by their commitment to their families and communities; they were often acutely aware of the trade-off between community membership and individual spiritual satisfaction. One young Modern Orthodox mother, who found religious fulfilment and a sense of belonging in women-only Orthodox and egalitarian Masorti services, was prepared to sacrifice this for the sake of her children's education, identity, and sense of security:

What keeps me Orthodox? Largely the children, because we've chosen the school and I've got a responsibility to them [...] and we've made a decision how to bring them up and how to educate them. I want to be Orthodox so the children have a background, because if I was to dilute things now they wouldn't know where they were coming from.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, Mahmood's work is vitally important in raising the question of the limitations of feminist analysis of nonliberal women and their choices and in broadening our conceptions of agency: 'By tracing the multiple modalities of agency [...] I hope to address the profound inability within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary.'⁹⁶ Her focus on non-liberal women, however, ignores the very specific dilemma of those women who are shaped by and feel allegiance to two competing worldviews, such as non-*haredi* Orthodox women; nor is this omission

⁹² See Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, 13-14 for an outline of the problems of feminist theory in coping with the intersection of ethnicity and gender; she notes that 'the particular ways in which ethnic and gender relations have interacted historically change the forms of ethnic and gender relations'.

⁹³ For the importance of ethnic identity and minority status in analyses of Orthodox Jewish women see Morris, 'Agents or Victims', who notes 'The present-day Hasidic construction of the Gentile as opponent/opposite is most significant and illustrates the tension between ethnic and female identity for Jewish women', and that hasidic women 'are more concerned with ethnic survival than with liberating themselves from Hasidic men' (p. 174).

⁹⁴ She does discuss the case of a newly religious wife whose activities were opposed by her less religious husband, but this was primarily a conflict between individuals rather than between a woman or group of women and their community; see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 176-80.

⁹⁵ Bernice Susser, interview.

⁹⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 155.

addressed by Morris, since she confines her analysis to hasidic women who do not feel the tug of competing worldviews in the same way.

The work of Bell, Mahmood, and Morris has raised new possibilities for the analysis of women's religious lives that go beyond the simple dichotomy of power and resistance, widening our understanding of different types of agency that do not necessarily conform to Western liberal models. I build on these ideas to explore the range of responses and agencies exhibited by women within the male-dominated realm of Orthodox Judaism, as they pursue religious goals of different types, from nonliberal ideals of piety that accept women's submission to male religious authority, to feminist-influenced ideals of fuller ritual participation and a more egalitarian distribution of knowledge, power, and status.

Faced with multiple life narratives—feminist, traditional-conservative, atheist, devotional—from which to choose, and living as members of a minority in a liberal Western society that partly defines itself by the ability of women to make autonomous choices, Orthodox Jewish women choose to remain within the Orthodox community and conform to its expectations and values.⁹⁷ However, they are not unthinking or blind: Western notions of self-fulfilment, choice, and gender equality shape even *haredi* women's attempts to find new ways of living as Orthodox women within the constraints of a male-dominated, highly conservative community. Bell notes that 'if the ritual construction of power on the higher levels of social organization builds on the micro-relations of power that shape daily life on the lower levels of the society, changes in the latter level can precipitate a crisis in which the demands of ritual to conform to traditional models clash with the ability of these rites to resonate with the real experiences of the social body'.⁹⁸ It is these tensions, created by the conflicting demands of the larger, Western society and the smaller, traditional community, that inspire and shape Jewish women's explorations of new communal rituals in particular, with their concomitant shift in power relationships within the Orthodox community.

⁹⁷ Though, as noted above, the price of exit is very high, so their choice is not entirely unconstrained.

⁹⁸ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 213.

Outline of thesis

Before presenting my research data, I first examine the context and describe the methodology of the project, in Chapter 2. Following a brief account of the history of the London Jewish community, I explore concepts of community and apply these to analyse the religious geography of today’s Orthodox Jewish London. After documenting change in Orthodox women’s religious activities over the last four decades, including two periods of rapid and far-ranging innovation in the 1990s and at present, I briefly review earlier studies of British Orthodox women. The chapter closes with a description of the methodology used, including a consideration of my own position as an ‘insider-outsider’.

Chapters 3 to 6 present the data from my research, in accordance with my first research aim of providing closely-observed descriptions of women’s activities and their understandings of them, in order to establish a body of evidence for analysis and evaluation. To facilitate this, I have divided these activities into four major categories, created by two intersecting axes: first, the axis of public or communal activity as opposed to domestic or home-based activity, which corresponds to the Jewish concept of the twin poles of synagogue and home; and second, the axis of ‘official’, communally sanctioned and culturally prescribed activity shading into ‘unofficial’ activity, which tends not to form part of the public production of ‘Jewishness’ and ‘Judaism’, and may or may not be regarded with approval by rabbis and communal leaders. The categories can be depicted thus, illustrated by a few examples:

Table 1.1 Structure of thesis

	Public/communal	Private/domestic
Official	<u>Chapter 3</u> Attending synagogue Joining ladies’ guild Bat mitzvah	<u>Chapter 5</u> Lighting sabbath candles Going to the <i>mikveh</i> Keeping a kosher kitchen
Unofficial	<u>Chapter 4</u> <i>Berakhah</i> parties Women’s <i>tefilah</i> groups Partnership <i>minyanim</i>	<u>Chapter 6</u> Tying red thread on baby clothes Wearing an amulet Not mending clothes while they are being worn

Each chapter presents examples of activities—in most of which I participated, and about which I talked to several women—and then analyses the data, focusing on my second and third research aims of identifying and accounting for variation within Orthodox women’s practices and beliefs, and of examining and understanding opportunities for and realizations of women’s creativity and agency in the patriarchal context. These themes reappear throughout the chapters, in particular in the examination of the different worldviews and emphases of *haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist women, as well as the constraints imposed by the male-dominated authority system; the creative ways in which women both work around and reinforce these constraints; and the shared goals of women who seek to become better Jews, even if the methods they envisage as appropriate to this task vary widely. Chapter 7 presents the research conclusions.

Chapter 2: Context and methodology of research

‘We were very much encouraged to both stand out and be invisible, which was a very Anglo-Jewish message of the early 1960s. The shadows of the Shoah fell very long.’ (Katherine Marks, interview)

* * *

To understand women’s religious lives and their associated choices, the communal context and the history that has shaped it need to be established. In addition, I will examine the nature of the community’s self-identification and the affiliation of its members, the character of contemporary Orthodoxy in London, and the historical factors underlying the topography of the Anglo-Jewish denominational landscape. The brief period of accelerated change in women’s religious activities in the early 1990s will follow, after which I will describe my working definitions and methodology.

Jews in London: historical background

Although it is a mobile community, with members emigrating to Israel, the United States, and elsewhere, and new members arriving from all over the world, most of London’s Jewish families have been here for three generations or more, and feel very ‘British’. The community dates from 1656, when the small number of Sefardi Jews living ‘undercover’ was tacitly permitted to remain, while 1690 saw the first Ashkenazi synagogue founded.¹ The Jewish population of Britain grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fuelled largely by Ashkenazi immigrants from Germany and Poland, and by 1851 reached 35,000 (this and subsequent numbers are approximate), 20,000 of whom lived in London. Many put down roots and prospered, with 5,000 moving to the newly fashionable West End. With the gradual disappearance of restrictions on their political, social, and economic activities through the nineteenth century, synagogues, schools, and community institutions such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews flourished, and Jews became more middle class.

¹This brief historical sketch is based on Bermant, *Troubled Eden*, Brook, *The Club*, and Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*.

This established British community—numbering 60,000 by 1880—was radically changed by a flood of Jews from the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe, sparked by pogroms beginning in April 1881. Between 1881 and 1905, 100,000 Yiddish-speaking Jews arrived in Britain, before the Aliens Act reduced the mass migration to a trickle. By 1900 London had 144,000 Jews, 83 percent of them living in crowded and squalid conditions in the East End.

The solidly middle-class Jewish establishment was horrified by the ‘primitive’ newcomers with their ‘oriental’ and exuberant religiosity;² indeed, ‘there was only one thing the old community could do, and that was to Anglicise the new’.³ The project was largely successful, using schools and youth clubs to influence immigrant children. After immigration practically ended in 1914, the process of Jewish embourgeoisement in London proceeded apace, with the East End gradually losing its Jews to the new middle-class suburbs. By the 1930s, with this process once again largely complete, another 50,000 immigrants arrived, this time from Nazi Germany and Austria, most of whom were not particularly observant, or belonged to the German Reform movement. This proved to be the last mass Jewish migration to Britain, though smaller groups arrived after the Second World War, notably after the failure of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, as well as from Iran, Iraq, Aden, and other Middle Eastern countries. In recent years, several thousand Israelis have moved to Britain, mostly settling in London, but have had a much smaller effect on the community. Many are secular, and most only reside in Britain temporarily, maintaining Israeli social networks rather than integrating into the British Jewish community.⁴ Those Israelis who do participate in the community tend to be the Orthodox, who need institutions such as synagogues and Jewish schools, and they have had some influence on religious life in London.⁵

Today, approximately 172,000 Jews live in London,⁶ clustered in specific neighbourhoods.⁷ A 2003 report on London’s Jews by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research summarizes:

² 50,000 were repatriated by the Jewish Board of Guardians.

³ Bermant, *Troubled Eden*, 30.

⁴ Rocker, ‘Expat and Excluded’.

⁵ *Berakhah* parties, for example, were introduced to Britain by Israeli women; see Ch. 4.

⁶ Graham, Boyd, and Vulkan, *2011 Census Results: Initial Insights ... Population*, 2-3.

[London's Jews are] a relatively affluent group of people with middle-class values and middle-class lifestyles. It is an ageing population [...] the Jewish population is far from uniform and [...] comprises a complex social and religious fabric [...] there is a far from simple situation with regard to the religious-secular continuum. Even indubitably secular Jews still observe many customs that are of a religious origin. Many prefer to have their parents cared for in Jewish care homes; their children attend Jewish youth organizations and they engage in Jewish-based leisure and cultural activities. Many of them have their children educated in Jewish schools and more would if Jewish schools with a more attractive Jewish ethos were available. What is absolutely apparent [...] is that London's Jews have long since ceased to comprise a religious group. They are truly an ethnies within British society, with shared historical memories, a myth of common ancestry, differentiating elements of common culture and an overall sense of solidarity [...] it would not be untruthful to state quite clearly that among Jews in London ethnicity overrides belief, except perhaps for the belief that being Jewish is important.⁸

Most London Jews live in the suburbs of north-west London, such as Hendon, Golders Green, and Finchley; many, especially younger families, have moved into the Greater London area to satellite towns such as Borehamwood and Radlett.⁹ Stamford Hill has a large, densely concentrated *haredi* population; the other main area of *haredi* residence is Golders Green.¹⁰

Community, communities, networks, and identity

The term 'community' is constantly used by Jews, generally in one of two distinct senses. The first, more general sense, used in popular discourse, refers to all Jews who identify as Jews and participate to some extent in Jewish activities, whether cultural or religious. Thus a woman who regularly attends synagogue, belongs to a religious Jewish women's organization, and raises money for Jewish causes might be described as 'very active in the community', but the same phrase could equally be applied to a man who does not belong to a synagogue or observe any religious practices, but who attends pro-Israel demonstrations, volunteers at a Jewish care home, and belongs to a Jewish bridge club. This broad sense of the term is apparent

⁷ A quarter of London's Jews live in eight of the 624 wards in the Greater London area. See Graham, *2011 Census Results: Initial Insights into Jewish Neighbourhoods*.

⁸ Becher *et al.*, *Portrait of Jews*, 64-5.

⁹ Housing costs are the main factor.

¹⁰ Between 4,500 and 7,600 individuals, about 18% of the UK *haredi* population; see Graham, *2011 Census Results: A Tale*, 7 n. 9.

in institutional names such as the Community Security Trust¹¹ or the London Jewish Community Centre. ‘Community’ membership, however, is not coterminous with ethnic Jewish origin, but is understood to be conferred by active involvement and self-identification. A Modern Orthodox¹² woman in her 60s reminisced about her student days:

Had I not become involved in what was then called I[nter]-U[niversity] J[ewish] F[ederation] [...] I probably would have been very Jewishly lost, and may even have been lost to the Jewish community, because all my friends were not Jewish.¹³

The second, narrower sense of the term, indicating a particular subgroup, is apparent when people speak of ‘my community’, ‘the Plymouth community’, ‘the *frum* community’,¹⁴ or ‘the Sefardi community’, by which they mean respectively: the members of a particular synagogue, the Jews of a provincial town, Jews of a particular religious orientation, or Jews of a particular origin. While all the women with whom I interacted thought of themselves as members of the wider Jewish community, they often spoke of ‘my community’ in the sense of the synagogue (or occasionally subgroup) to which they belonged, and frequently expressed their identification with it with warmth and passion:

I’m incredibly wedded to my own community, because that’s where the form my current Jewish life takes began, and I *love* my community, and I’m too old now nor do I wish to leave it.¹⁵

Most Jews who identify as belonging to the Jewish community also belong to several of these ‘sub’-communities, all of which overlap with family and social circles within the Jewish and wider communities, and most of which are not mutually exclusive.¹⁶

¹¹ A charity that ‘provides physical security, training and advice for the protection of British Jews’; see <http://www.thecst.org.uk/>.

¹² For a definition of this and other terms, see below.

¹³ Sheila Dorfman, interview.

¹⁴ *Frum* (Yiddish: ‘pious’) is used by British Jews to refer to someone who is religiously observant in a visible way, for instance by keeping the rules of *kashrut* and the sabbath strictly. It does not entirely correspond to the term ‘religious’, as it need not imply a spiritually or theologically conscious person.

¹⁵ Stella James, interview, speaking of her synagogue.

¹⁶ For Jewish concepts of community, see Webber, ‘Introduction’, 23-4.

As Anthony Cohen has noted,¹⁷ much anthropological and sociological discussion has focused on the difficulty of defining and analysing the concept of ‘community’.¹⁸ I will adopt his practice of seeking ‘use’ rather than ‘lexical definition’ of the term, concentrating on the ‘consciousness of community ... encapsulated in perception of its boundaries ... which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction’.¹⁹ As Cohen notes, groups mark their social boundaries by using and manipulating shared symbols, which are sufficiently ambivalent to allow them to be interpreted in different ways by members of the same community, thus constantly transforming ‘the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity with such efficacy that people can still invest the “community” with ideological integrity’.²⁰ Though Cohen emphasizes the way in which people ‘can “think” themselves into difference’, there are practical and organizational correlates of these symbolic boundaries: for instance, the way in which some Orthodox rabbis’ declarations that Reform Judaism is ‘pseudo-Judaism’ have led to Orthodox rejection of Reform converts as Jews and refusal to call up identifiably Reform Jews to the Torah in Orthodox synagogues. A major storm over the symbolic boundary between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox blew up in October-November 2013 over Limmud, the cross-communal study conference held over Christmas and attended by over 2,500 Jews.²¹ In contrast to his immediate predecessor, the new Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, announced he would be attending Limmud, whereupon the ex-head of the London Beth Din, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu,²² issued a public letter strongly discouraging Orthodox Jews from going. This was followed by a similar letter from seven other *haredi* rabbis, a four-page letter in the same vein issued to his congregants by the rabbi of an independent non-*haredi* Orthodox synagogue (many of whose congregants attend Limmud), and countless heated responses in the Jewish media and online. At stake was the creation of a boundary between Orthodoxy and non-Orthodoxy, viewed as essential to survival by the *haredim* and right-wing traditionalists, and as immoral

¹⁷ A. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, introduction.

¹⁸ For a critique of the over-simplistic nature of many ‘community studies’ in the early and mid-twentieth century, see Day, *Community and Everyday Life*, ch. 2.

¹⁹ A. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ See <www.limmud.org>.

²² A *dayan* is a judge in a *beit din*, a rabbinic court.

and divisive by the left-wing traditionalists, the Modern Orthodox, and the non-Orthodox.²³

Cohen's thesis of the symbolic construction of community accords well with the lived experience of participating in the London Jewish community, which is hard to define or delimit in terms of locality, institutional structures, or even ethnic origin, but is constituted by many partly overlapping symbolic boundaries, expressed in denominational affiliation, cultural activities, social and marriage patterns, educational choices, eating habits, and dress.

The concept of 'networks' also provides a useful way of thinking about Jewish social life. Graham Day has observed that 'focusing on networks takes away the holistic connotations of "community", making it a question instead of the quality and pattern of interpersonal relations',²⁴ starting from the individual—an emphasis particularly useful in looking at women's religious lives, which often cut across the denominational, sub-denominational, and institutional boundaries subdividing the Jewish community.²⁵ Several factors seem to underlie women's greater freedom in crossing denominational lines: first, women are less heavily invested in denominational leadership positions (especially Orthodox women, who cannot be rabbis); second, since they are often regarded, particularly in the Orthodox world, as having lower status than men, they are consequently 'invisible' to some extent and can cross boundaries with a certain degree of impunity; third, since women are less likely to reach high levels of Jewish education (again, particularly in the Orthodox sector), they are less likely to harbour theological and ideological ideas that classify other forms of Judaism as 'inauthentic'; and fourth, since they are assigned special responsibility for the domestic and familial sphere, they are more likely than men to maintain contact with family members who belong to different denominations.

²³ See Rocker, 'Limmud Row'.

²⁴ Day, *Community*, 217.

²⁵ For instance, *berakhah* parties (see below, Ch. 4) were attended by women from across the Orthodox spectrum—*haredi*, traditionalist, Sefardi—and women's *tefilah* groups and partnership *minyanim* (see below, Ch. 4) include some Masorti women; surprisingly little attention is paid to this by participants. David Golinkin has observed that 'when it comes to expanding the participation of Jewish women in public ritual life, Jewish women tend to ignore and cross denominational lines' (Golinkin, 'Participation', 59).

Recent technological and social developments are bringing and will continue to bring change to traditional notions of community. Harvey Goldberg notes that today the notion of community ‘cannot be separated from new forms of literacy and communication’, such as the Internet.²⁶ Developing Arjun Appadurai’s idea of viewing local social action against a range of ‘-scapes’, such as ‘mediascapes’ and ‘ethnoscapes’, he points out that Jews’ ‘creation of community ... places them within dynamic textscapes’, now often digitally accessed, that ‘define and express versions of Judaism and infuse social links to other Jews’. Hitherto accepted concepts of community are thus changing and shifting:

In an era when some Jewish groups ideologically place themselves in strict opposition to others, they also find themselves facing the unprecedented possibility of mutual or overlapping communities.²⁷

This may not actually provide an ‘unprecedented possibility’—mutual and overlapping communities already exist in the British Jewish world in contexts such as Limmud—but the possibilities of constructing new types of community by means of the new technologies are already being explored. The Grassroots community in London, with a loose membership that spans the denominational range and beyond, is an example; it is organized, promoted, and shaped on social media sites such as Facebook, but also possesses a real presence in the form of services, study sessions, retreats, and social events.²⁸ The presence of young women with high levels of secular education among its founders and most active members is also very noticeable, contrasting strongly with traditional forms of community such as synagogues. This may also prove an important factor both in the development of new forms of community, and the transformation of existing forms, as they adapt to these new possibilities and seek to take advantage of them.

²⁶ Goldberg, *Jewish Passages*, 25. See also the Institute of Jewish Policy Research’s report, *New Conceptions of Community*, on recent developments.

²⁷ Goldberg, *Jewish Passages*, 25. The influence of the Internet on Jewish religious life is already palpable in many ways: for instance, access to classical Jewish texts and translations of them; the use of Orthodox and non-Orthodox outreach sites for study and personal religious development (see the account of the ‘Ahavas Yisroel’ group in Ch. 4); access to teachers and rabbis around the world, whose lectures appear on Youtube or at ‘virtual yeshivas’; and access to blogs, which often give alternative views of events in the community.

²⁸ See <<http://grassrootsjews.org/>>. Since it is not an Orthodox community, though it has many Orthodox members, I have not investigated it in depth.

Community affiliation thus exists at several levels and in several modes, with an individual's particular combination of networks and community memberships providing basic parameters of his or her individual Jewish identity. That identity itself is a complex and contentious issue; as Jonathan Webber has observed:

It is the subtlety of the coexistence of multiple components that constitutes the ethnographic complexity of modern Jewish life and thereby the construction of modern Jewish identities. Both religious and secular elements could be said to be involved in, say, a tea-party organized by a group of religious women for the purpose of fundraising.²⁹

This complex, layered character of modern Jewish identity also underlies and complicates the definition of the term 'Orthodox', discussed below.

The development of British Orthodoxy and the British Jewish landscape

The Orthodox landscape of Anglo-Jewry is unique, incorporating a large number of Jews who would probably belong to the Conservative movement if they lived in the United States. The peculiarly British version of Orthodoxy developed within and embodied by the United Synagogue plays a central role in the tensions currently polarizing Orthodoxy in Britain, and is vital to understanding Orthodox women's choices and the constraints shaping them. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the development of the term 'Orthodoxy'.

As noted by Webber, 'the category of "orthodoxy" is itself modern in origin',³⁰ and it has been characterized as 'more a mutation than a direct continuation of the traditional Judaism from which it emerged'.³¹ The term can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, when traditionalists began to define themselves in opposition to Jewish reformers, who 'began to advocate not merely changes in Jewish thought, but reform of Jewish practices'.³² At this point the term 'Orthodox', originally signifying an opponent of Enlightenment principles, whether Jewish or Christian, began to take on the meaning of a Jewish opponent of Jewish religious

²⁹ Webber, 'Modern Jewish Identities', 261.

³⁰ Ibid., 264.

³¹ Samet, 'Beginnings', 249.

³² Blutinger, "'So-called Orthodoxy'", 320.

reform—a change completed by the 1830s. By the 1870s the term ‘Orthodox’ had become the accepted label for traditionalist Jews who opposed the Reform movement (though other terms, such as ‘Torah-true’, were generated within the ranks of the Orthodox and continue to be used alongside ‘Orthodox’). ‘The Orthodox’ had become an identifiable group, thanks to their vigorous opposition to the perceived threat posed by modernity to traditional Judaism, and to most of the measures proposed by the Reformers to find a *modus vivendi* between these two worldviews.

Moshe Samet points out that, from the first, there were different trends within Orthodoxy, in particular the German and Hungarian types, which underlie the divisions within Orthodoxy today (Modern/Centrist Orthodoxy and *haredi* Orthodoxy respectively).³³ The German (neo-)Orthodox, led by Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-88), adopted a positive attitude to the non-Jewish modern world, sanctioning a certain degree of secular study and participation in the cultural life of the surrounding society: their slogan was *torah im derekh erets* (literally: ‘Torah with the way of the land’ [i.e. secular culture]). Simultaneously, however, they rejected the Reformers, preferring to set up their own religious and educational institutions, and thus splitting the Jewish community, rather than be forced to recognize and contribute to Reform institutions and practices. In contrast, the extremist Orthodox of north-eastern Hungary rejected all accommodation with or knowledge of the non-Jewish world, and developed a novel ideology and method of manipulating *halakhah* (Jewish law) in order to justify their position;³⁴ their slogan might be characterized as *hadash asur min hatorah* (‘All that is new is forbidden by the Torah’).³⁵ Although just as opposed to the Reform movement as the German Orthodox, the Hungarian extremists felt particular loathing for the latter, characterizing them as hypocritical ‘Sadducees’.

Samet argues that the *hasidim*, adherents of a movement originating in the eighteenth century, and their opponents, the *mitnagedim*, of Eastern Europe were not originally part of the Orthodox grouping. He describes hasidism as a ‘fundamentalist movement whose aim was to restore the religion to its pristine splendour, and to revitalize religious values which had lost their potency’, and the opposing

³³ Samet, ‘Beginnings’, 249.

³⁴ See Silber, ‘Emergence’.

³⁵ A novel interpretation by R. Moses Sofer (1753-1839) of a phrase that originally referred to the prohibition on consuming new grain before the Omer offering is made.

mitnagedim as ‘a movement of protest against those who would tamper with the integrity of the tradition’.³⁶ Later, however, both these groups allied themselves with Orthodoxy, and today are regarded as quintessentially *haredi* Orthodox.³⁷

In Britain, things developed rather differently: a ‘traditional’ rather than a self-consciously ‘Orthodox’ outlook has persisted from the nineteenth century until the present. A survey commissioned by Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler (1803-90) in 1845 revealed ‘a series of Anglo-Jewish communities in which observance of orthodox practice was lax, synagogue attendance poor, and educational facilities woefully deficient’,³⁸ and little changed thereafter. The first Reform synagogue was founded in 1840, but the small Reform movement did not present a particular threat to the traditional community, most of whom were comfortably anglicized by the late nineteenth century, and whose synagogues were amalgamated by Act of Parliament in 1870 to form the United Synagogue, an Orthodox institution led by a chief rabbi. Geoffrey Alderman observes that ‘the political considerations that had led German Jews to embrace Reform never existed in England, with the result that it was possible for the unique form of “genteel orthodoxy of the United Synagogue” to flourish and grow, where in other circumstances it would almost certainly have been crushed.’³⁹ Religious fervour was unusual, and most United Synagogue members felt that ‘belonging to a synagogue was [...] more important than attending it’;⁴⁰ a census of religious worship carried out by the *British Weekly* in October 1886 revealed that only 10-15 percent of the total Jewish population of west and north-west London attended synagogue on a sabbath morning. Though Nathan Adler had fiercely opposed suggestions to reform the prayerbook and shorten the liturgy, his son, Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler (1839-1911), was more accommodating and in 1889 accepted shortened services, the omission of the priestly benediction on festivals, and the introduction of verbal expressions of consent for both bride and bridegroom—innovations unthinkable in an Orthodox context in the rest of Europe.

³⁶ Samet, ‘Beginnings’, 251.

³⁷ The label *mitnagedim* is obsolete; this group is now described as ‘Lithuanian’ or ‘yeshivish’.

³⁸ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 41. The word ‘orthodox’ here corresponds to ‘traditional’ in terms of the definitions used in this thesis (see below).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

All this changed with the mass immigration of thousands of East European Jews in the 1880s, many of whom were deeply traditional. The large ‘cathedral’ synagogues of Anglo-Jewry were completely alien to them, and they preferred organizing their own small *hevras*,⁴¹ in which they maintained the unreformed, noisy, ‘oriental’ tradition of prayer that shocked the decorous Jews of the host community. They also preferred the leadership of traditionally-educated East European rabbis to the English-speaking, university-trained rabbis of the United Synagogue, and set up their own communal organizations, such as Mahazikei Hadat, which authorized marriages, divorces, and *shehitah* (kosher slaughtering), and founded traditional *talmud torah* schools for children, all in direct competition with existing Anglo-Jewish institutions.

The Anglo-Jewish establishment, in the person of the Liberal MP Samuel Montagu (1832-1911), responded by founding the Federation of Synagogues in 1887 as an umbrella organization for the hitherto unregulated synagogues of the East End, with the aim of bringing the immigrants ‘within the discipline of the existing communal structures’⁴² and preventing schism in the community. Eventually the Federation absorbed most members of Mahazikei Hadat and proved to be ‘the largest single instrument of Anglicization, as well as of social control, that Anglo-Jewry possessed’.⁴³ By the mid-twentieth century it had lost its East European and traditionalist character, and its members had become very similar in lifestyle, aspirations, and religious practice to those of the United Synagogue, but it continued to guard its independence jealously, maintaining a parallel burial scheme, *beit din*, *kashrut* supervision, and—after a brief flirtation with the United Synagogue—declining to recognize the authority of the Chief Rabbi.⁴⁴

Further to the right, dissatisfaction with the ‘milk-and-water’ Orthodoxy of the United Synagogue prompted others, mainly from Germany and Austria-Hungary, to found their own independent and strictly neo-Orthodox synagogue, the North London Beth Hamedrash, in 1886. In 1909 they invited the Hungarian neo-Orthodox Rabbi Dr Victor Schonfeld (1880-1930) to lead them. Several smaller synagogues joined them, founding the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations (UOHC,

⁴¹ The *hevra* was a small association, part synagogue and part social centre; see Bermant, *Troubled Eden*, 213.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 16.

popularly known as the Adas) in 1926, after a series of rows with Chief Rabbi Dr Joseph Hertz (1872-1946) over marriage certification and *shehitah*.⁴⁵ The Union supported its own communal *beit din*, *kashrut* authority (Kedassia), and burial society, but constituent synagogues were free to govern themselves. Although its ‘core’ synagogue, the Stamford Hill Adas Yisroel, originally closely followed the traditions of Hirsch’s Frankfurt synagogue, the influx of *hasidim* in the 1930s fundamentally changed the Union’s character—a trend intensified by the arrival of more *hasidim* after the 1956 Hungarian uprising. By this time the older, Hirschian members were moving out of Stamford Hill to Golders Green and Hendon in north-west London, transforming Stamford Hill into a largely hasidic enclave.

Tensions and resentments endure between what Chaim Bermant called the ‘White Adath [= Adas]’ of north-west London and the ‘Black Adath’ of Stamford Hill,⁴⁶ though the formerly Hirschian ‘White’ faction has moved perceptibly to the right in outlook and practice, and might better be described as ‘Grey’ nowadays. Unlike its American counterpart, Hirsch’s confident neo-Orthodoxy has largely petered out in Britain, swamped by immigrant *hasidim* and the ‘slide to the right’ throughout the Orthodox world of the last four decades, which has seen the non-*haredi* world adopt some *haredi* standards, customs, and ideologies.⁴⁷

Liberal Judaism, a breakaway movement to the left, emerged from mainstream Orthodoxy at roughly the same time as the Union. Founded by individuals dissatisfied with the lack of spirituality of the United Synagogue, it was led by the Bible scholar Claude Montefiore (1858-1938), who promoted a universalist, ethically-focused version of Judaism, and Lily Montagu (1873-1963), the daughter of Samuel Montagu, active in battling unemployment, poor housing, and exploitation of workers. They set up the Jewish Religious Union in 1902, which became an egalitarian denomination to the left of Reform, establishing its first synagogue in 1911.

⁴⁵ Ibid., ch. 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 222-3.

⁴⁷ See below, n. 51.

The last major schism in Anglo-Jewry was ignited by the ‘Jacobs Affair’ in the early 1960s.⁴⁸ The Orthodox Rabbi Louis Jacobs (1920-2006), a brilliant scholar educated both at the *haredi* Gateshead Yeshiva and at University College, London, had been appointed as lecturer at Jews’ College, the Anglo-Jewish Orthodox rabbinical seminary, with the expectation that he would become the next principal of the college when the incumbent, Dr Isidore Epstein, retired in 1961; he was also a favoured candidate for the next Chief Rabbi. In 1957 he had published a book, *We Have Reason to Believe*, which, although designed as a defence of Orthodox Judaism, contained ideas about the origin of the Torah that, while by no means novel, were unacceptable to right-wing Orthodoxy. After Epstein’s retirement, no move was made to appoint Jacobs, who eventually resigned from his lectureship in protest. The Chief Rabbi, Israel Brodie (1895-1979), influenced by the *haredi* London Beth Din, announced that he could not accept Jacobs’ appointment because of the latter’s theological opinions, and when in 1964 Jacobs sought to return to his previous pastoral post at the New West End Synagogue, Brodie refused to agree to this appointment unless Jacobs recanted. Over 300 members of the New West End left the synagogue, and bought the old St John’s Wood Synagogue building, where they opened the New London Synagogue, led by Rabbi Jacobs. Although Jacobs, regarding his views as well within Orthodoxy, had had no intention of founding a new denomination, his synagogue and other small communities inspired by it later affiliated themselves to the American Conservative movement, founding the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues in 1985. In spite of this ideological shift, many Masorti synagogues still preserve the atmosphere and practices of the ‘old’ United Synagogue, before its university-educated rabbis were largely replaced by *haredim* and its *haredi* Beth Din gained unprecedented power. This makes it attractive to United Synagogue members who are unhappy with the ‘haredization’ of their synagogues.

This complex history of schism and denominational proliferation underlies and continues to shape the contemporary religious geography of Anglo-Jewry that forms the backdrop for this study of women’s religious lives.

⁴⁸ See Bermant, *Troubled Eden*, ch. 19; Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 361-4; and Jacobs’ autobiography, *Helping with Inquiries*.

Jewish religious topography today

Moving from left to right, current denominations include Liberal Judaism and Reform Judaism (outside the scope of this study); Masorti Judaism (mentioned tangentially here); and Orthodox Judaism, itself subdivided at the institutional level into the United Synagogue, the Federation of Synagogues, and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Sefardi synagogues are Orthodox, but embrace a wide range of practice and belief, and in some ways parallel the ‘broad church’ character of the United Synagogue. There are also a few independent Orthodox synagogues, occupying various positions on the spectrum, from Yakar (1978-2010) on the left, to Ner Yisrael (founded in 1984) to the right of the United Synagogue.

In terms of size, a 2010 survey of synagogue affiliation in Britain by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (IJPR) found that 54.7 percent of affiliated Jews in Britain belonged to ‘Central Orthodox’ synagogues (mainly United Synagogue and Federation), while 10.9 percent belonged to ‘Strictly Orthodox’ synagogues (mainly UOHC), and 3.5 percent belonged to Sefardi synagogues.⁴⁹ Comparison with figures from 1990 shows a 31 percent decrease from the previous ‘Central Orthodox’ share, and a 9.5 percent decrease in the Sefardi, while the ‘Strictly Orthodox’ increased by 102 percent (thanks to a high birthrate) and the Masorti increased by 85 percent, largely at the United Synagogue’s expense. The religious landscape of Anglo-Jewry is changing fast, with a trend towards polarization to right and left and the decline of the ‘centre’—the territory of the United Synagogue, which used to be the largest sector.

The neatness of this arrangement of denominational institutions, however, conceals a much more complex set of intertwining axes of religious life, making the construction of a consistent and accurate set of descriptive labels and definitions a nearly impossible task—and one of limited utility. The authors of the IJPR report on synagogue membership noted that the nature of synagogue affiliation itself is changing, with some families joining two synagogues of different denominations, and many Jews attending synagogue without formal affiliation.⁵⁰ In addition, new or

⁴⁹ Graham and Vulkan, *Synagogue Membership*. Non-Orthodox figures were: Masorti: 2.7%, Reform: 19.4%, and Liberal: 8.7%.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

alternative prayer services, such as the partnership *minyanim* discussed in Chapter 4, usually take place in private homes or rented premises. When other aspects of Jewish religious life, such as religious practice, religious belief and outlook, and personal religiosity or spirituality, are examined in addition to the denominational spectrum just described, and when factors such as the high degree of religious mobility apparent in Anglo-Jewry and recent trends within the denominations themselves (such as the increasing influence of *haredi* Orthodoxy on the United Synagogue) are added, a much more complex and dynamic picture emerges.

Orthodox Jews in London perceive a basic division between Orthodoxy and other denominations, but they also increasingly experience Orthodoxy itself as consisting of two separate, though occasionally overlapping, communities—the *haredim* (often described as ‘the black hats’, or ‘the *frum* community’) and the non-*haredim* (variously characterized as ‘United Synagogue’, ‘mainstream Orthodox’, ‘Centrist Orthodox’, or ‘Modern Orthodox’). The Sefardim, while recognized as Orthodox in a general sense, are perceived (both by themselves and by Ashkenazim) as a special case, a parallel community based on origin rather than theological or practical differences. Sefardim often point out the traditional rather than denominational character of their community as a particular advantage encouraging communal unity, though they too are beginning to feel the divisive effects of the ‘slide to the right’.

The Ashkenazi Orthodox community, however, seems to be increasingly polarized, with a widening gap in the centre.⁵¹ Non-*haredi* Orthodox often feel they have more in common with Jews to the left of Orthodoxy, especially Masorti, than with *haredim* (indeed, faced with *haredi* encroachment into the non-*haredi* Orthodox community, many have moved leftwards to Masorti). Analysis of census data from 2011 has revealed that two distinct Jewish populations can be identified in demographic terms within the UK Jewish community: the fast-growing *haredi* population, with an average age of 27, and the non-*haredi* population (non-*haredi* Orthodox, Masorti, Reform, and Liberal), with an average age of 44. At least 29 percent of all Jewish births in the UK were in the *haredi* population (who constitute about 15 percent of

⁵¹ For polarization in American Orthodoxy, see Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*. Many factors and trends identified there also apply to British Orthodoxy, although the American situation is different in important respects. Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism*, offers an account of the British version of the ‘slide to the right’ in institutional rather than ‘grassroots’ terms. See also Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 250-1.

the total Jewish population).⁵² Since three of the five *haredi* residential neighbourhoods are in London, the existence of these separate, though linked, Jewish populations is very evident there. The demographic differences between the *haredi* and non-*haredi* Orthodox populations are reinforced by differences in education, occupation, dress, gender roles, and religious practice, to the extent that one can speak of two Orthodox Jewish communities in London, roughly corresponding to the denominational groupings of the United Synagogue and the UOHC, with the Federation occupying a somewhat ambiguous position in the middle.⁵³

However, these groups are not rigidly bounded or completely separate: a better image might be of a clustering of individuals at both ends of a graduated spectrum, with a number of people in the middle who bridge or move between the two. In addition, there is constant movement and interpenetration between the two extremes: for instance, most non-*haredi* Orthodox Jewish schools employ *haredi* teachers for Jewish studies; many *haredim* prefer to consult Jewish doctors and lawyers, most of whom are not *haredi*; a high proportion of rabbis employed by non-*haredi*, United synagogues are *haredim*;⁵⁴ and growing numbers of non-*haredi* Jews join the *haredi* community as a result of religious conviction.⁵⁵ Further complicating the picture, some members of United synagogues are *haredi* in lifestyle and self-identification, while others' observance resembles that of Reform and Liberal Jews.

Rather than examine both communities separately, I decided to study women across both groups: partly to determine whether there were significant differences in the religious views and lives of *haredi* and non-*haredi* women, and to investigate how women from different backgrounds influenced each other, and partly for practical reasons, since my central locus was Hendon, where *haredim* are a significant

⁵² Graham, *2011 Census Results: A Tale*, 9.

⁵³ Federation rabbis (and ideology) are *haredi*, while the laity differ little from those of the United Synagogue, though there is an increasing trend towards the religious right.

⁵⁴ This trend accelerated when Jews' College (renamed London School of Jewish Studies [LSJS]) ceased to ordain rabbis in 1999, forcing candidates for the rabbinate to train either in Israel or the USA, often in *haredi yeshivot*.

⁵⁵ Some individuals leave the *haredi* community, though anecdotal evidence suggests they often drop all Jewish religious observance rather than joining the non-*haredi* Orthodox. In 2013 Gesher EU, an organization for people leaving the *haredi* community, was founded, which by 2014 had been contacted by about 20 men and women in search of support (see Oliver, 'Ex-Charedi Women'). See also Winston, *Unchosen*.

minority within the Jewish population.⁵⁶ There are significant differences of outlook and self-understanding between women from the two communities, shaping their religious lives in different ways, but they rarely used the *haredi/non-haredi* divide as a significant marker of religious behaviour. Indeed, a few had difficulty in deciding whether they belonged to one group or the other,⁵⁷ reinforcing the image of a graduated spectrum between two poles, rather than two homogenous and separate communities.

Religious mobility does not stop within the bounds of the Orthodox community. An under-researched aspect of the British Jewish community is the surprisingly high level of movement across denominational borders and in levels of personal religious observance in the course of an individual's life, or within a single family. While several studies of *ba'alei teshuvah* (newly observant Jews) have been carried out, particularly in America,⁵⁸ and some research exists on Jews who abandon religious practice altogether,⁵⁹ little attention has been paid to Jews who move from Orthodoxy to Masorti or to Reform, and to the factors underlying their decision to do so (excepting the beginnings of the Masorti movement in Britain).

This was demonstrated in the small sample of the 27 women I interviewed. They include three women who left Orthodoxy (one ceased to define herself as religious,⁶⁰ the other two joined the Masorti movement⁶¹), one woman who moved from the *haredi* community to Modern Orthodoxy, and two women who became less observant while remaining within Orthodoxy. Moving in the opposite direction, one woman from a nominally Orthodox but non-observant family joined Lubavitch

⁵⁶ Apart from interviewing two hasidic women, I did not attempt to study the Stamford Hill community: it would have been very difficult for me to gain acceptance there. In addition, there is very little research on non-*haredi* Orthodox women in Britain, and I wanted to make a start on this.

⁵⁷ A single woman in her 20s tried to define her family: 'People would look at our family and say *haredi*, but we're not really ... people who are *haredi* might consider us a bit more Modern Orthodox.' Sheyna Marcus, interview.

⁵⁸ See Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*; Mock-Degen, *Dynamics of Becoming Orthodox*; Beynor, *Becoming Frum*.

⁵⁹ See Endelman, *Radical Assimilation*, and above, n. 55.

⁶⁰ Although defining herself as a humanist, after a brief period attending Masorti synagogues, she continues to keep a kosher kitchen as well as the sabbath and festivals, since her husband has remained Orthodox and her social circle is largely Orthodox.

⁶¹ One married a non-religious man, and Masorti provided a 'halfway house' with which they were both happy; the other left the United Synagogue after a row occasioned by a rabbi's insensitivity over a relation's death, joined a Reform synagogue, and eventually moved to the Masorti movement, where she felt more at home.

hasidism, one woman converted to Modern Orthodoxy, and three women became more observant and religiously engaged while staying within the Orthodox subdenomination in which they had grown up.

When the lives of their parents, children, siblings, and spouses are examined,⁶² this tendency to movement across (and sometimes out of) denominations continues: one woman's parents had moved from Modern Orthodoxy to Satmar hasidism and another woman's sister and daughter had become *haredi*; one woman's husband had moved from Reform to (Sefardi) Orthodoxy; two women had children who had become 'more religious'; one woman had a daughter who had become Masorti, another a son who had joined Reform, and another a husband who had joined Masorti after lacking any previous affiliation; and one woman had a son, and another woman a sibling who had abandoned all religious practice. This pattern of constant movement seems common across the entire Jewish community. No research exists on the effects of this denominational mobility on religious life and belief in the British Jewish community, though a clear social effect can be seen in the links these moves create between different sub-communities; most Jews in London have relatives who belong to a wide range of denominations and none.

Another important aspect of the Anglo-Jewish religious scene is the hugely varied and somewhat amorphous nature of the United Synagogue. While the *haredi* community is a bounded enclave, with specific, detailed expectations regarding religious practice and belief, backed up by powerful social controls enforcing conformity, the non-*haredi* sector lacks a strong, unified ideology or code of practice, and is consequently far harder to define and delimit. Within the 'broad church' of the United Synagogue (and to a lesser extent, in the Federation) members may or may not keep kosher, observe the sabbath as prescribed by *halakhah*, believe in God, or accept the divine origin of the Torah.⁶³ The official position, embodied in rabbis' sermons, synagogue practice, synagogue-based activities, and the ethos of Orthodox schools, is uncompromisingly Orthodox, but the actual practice and beliefs

⁶² This is an impressionistic sketch that depends on what I was told; interviewees probably did not list all family members who had changed denomination, since they were not specifically asked about this.

⁶³ A 1992 review of the United Synagogue revealed 'only 10 per cent classified themselves as "strictly Orthodox (Shomrei Shabbat)", whilst 67 per cent identified as "Traditional (but not strictly Orthodox)". Only 29% attended synagogue every week, though this rose to 53% on Yom Kippur. See Kalms, *United Synagogue Review*, 240.

of United Synagogue members vary from *haredi* to non-observant and atheist, with every possible variation in between. It is by no means uncommon to encounter United Synagogue members who will admit to lacking any religious beliefs whatsoever but who still maintain a kosher home, observe the festivals, send their children to a Jewish school, and expect them to marry within the faith; they might best be characterized as a subset of non-*haredi* Orthodoxy, based on an ethnic, traditionalist attachment rather than a religious or spiritual one.⁶⁴ Though taking little active part in shaping religious life, members of this ethnic-based/identitarian group often oppose change vigorously, including change designed to increase women's participation or rights, since any alteration in the synagogue or ritual practice they associate with their childhood and their families is deeply threatening to their sense of identity. I will refer to this group as 'traditionalists'.

The greatest advantage of the United Synagogue is that it provides a comfortable home for all levels of Jewish practice and belief: 'The United Synagogue was intended to function as an umbrella organization in which all Jews who were prepared to identify as Orthodox, regardless of their practice, could be encompassed.'⁶⁵ However, this inclusive character has proved to be its Achilles' heel, and the traditional, tolerant, 'light' version of Orthodoxy that characterized the United Synagogue has not proved robust enough to withstand more modern pressures. A religious lifestyle that was good enough for many women's parents would seem inadequate now. Remembering her childhood in the 1960s, Katherine Marks, a religiously observant Jewish educator, describes her intensely Jewish but halakhically inconsistent family:

My parents ticked a lot of the boxes of the absolute typical Anglo thing of the time. So my parents wouldn't, unless they absolutely had to—and I do remember these rules being broken occasionally—go shopping on a Shabat, [but] if they really had to then they would, and they would drive on Shabat but only to go to an aunt's house or something like that, and I stopped driving on Shabat when I was about 13, 14, and that caused a lot of difficulty. [...] My parents kept kosher in the home, but ate out, very occasionally would eat *treyf* out,⁶⁶ but be very upset to do it in front of me

⁶⁴ See Webber, 'Modern Jewish Identities', 250-1, 255, who speaks of religion becoming 'the facade of the community', and the 'redefinition of religion as ethnicity'.

⁶⁵ Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism*, 10.

⁶⁶ Yiddish, 'non-kosher food'.

[...] We took the days off school for *hagim*,⁶⁷ my mum and dad didn't work on *hagim*, and Friday night was Friday night. Friday night we lit the candles, always on time, whenever that was. We didn't make *kidush*, we didn't *bentsh*,⁶⁸ but my mum would make chicken and also she would do *tsholnt* for Shabat lunch,⁶⁹ and there was no washing or ironing on Shabat, it was a different day for her.

Standards of religious observance preached by rabbis and assumed by Jewish schools are now considerably stricter, and today's United Synagogue members are often at a loss to position themselves in religious terms and lack religious confidence: several lifelong members wondered whether they were 'Orthodox enough' when I asked to interview them for research on Orthodox women. Another woman in her 50s, who grew up in an observant United Synagogue home but is now Masorti, told me, 'I really understood the *haredi* world, I really understood the Reform world, I couldn't place myself anywhere, I'm all along the line.' A common narrative among older United Synagogue members concerns the child who goes to a Modern Orthodox or *haredi* yeshiva or seminary in Israel for a year or two, and, returning home, rejects the vague theology and 'half-hearted' observance of the parents and 'becomes *frum*', often moving to a more right-wing synagogue or becoming *haredi*; in some cases, the parents follow the child's lead and change their own religious practice and affiliation.⁷⁰ The other common story is that of the child who abandons Orthodoxy altogether. Both narratives and the unease of those 'left in the middle' are described by Sheila Dorfman, a religiously observant United Synagogue educator in her 60s:

The younger generation are polarizing, they're either becoming very very *frum*, in which case [...] they find their satisfaction in the minutiae of religion, or they give up on United Synagogue-type religion and move further to the left. [...] I think there is a typical United Synagogue woman who goes to *shul* [synagogue] every week and is on the ladies' guild, and will go to lectures and will do a certain amount [...] and they're very comfortable thank you, and they don't want *anything* to change. And I think that group of women is getting smaller.

⁶⁷ Hebrew, 'festivals'.

⁶⁸ Yiddish, 'bless', i.e. recite the long grace after meals prescribed by *halakhah*.

⁶⁹ Cooking is prohibited on the sabbath; *tsholnt* is a traditional dish designed to cook slowly from Friday afternoon to Saturday lunchtime.

⁷⁰ Several interviewees had experienced this.

It is not only the religiously observant or the yeshiva- or seminary-educated young who are scathing about United Synagogue religiosity (or lack thereof). Historians of Anglo-Jewry have also denigrated its undemanding traditionalism:

The United Synagogue acquired—perhaps had been born with—a species of religious schizophrenia, and deliberately so. Within and through it, orthodoxy survived, but usually in a much diluted form, supported by businessmen and their wives who reached an accommodation with a religious creed they themselves no longer practised to the full, or even fully understood.⁷¹

Such criticism was echoed by several interviewees, most of them members of the United Synagogue. Sheila Dorfman complained:

The United Synagogue has lost its identity, it's fearful, it's introverted, it's reversionary. *Haredim* have *haredi* rabbis, Reform have Reform rabbis, Masorti have Masorti rabbis, Liberals have Liberal rabbis, and the United Synagogue has *haredi* rabbis and a *haredi beis din*.⁷² And consequently the United Synagogue is frightened of its own shadow, it doesn't know who it is, it doesn't know who it wants to be, and even if it does it's not going to say so because it might be thrown out into the deep yonder of non-Orthodox organizations, and it's petrified of that.

The gap between religious leaders and the laity is growing wider: Geoffrey Alderman recently observed that 'The U[nited] S[ynagogue] is bipolar. [...] Its lay membership is more radical (by which I mean more liberal) than its clerical leadership and whereas in times past this membership was more than happy to pay rabbis to be Orthodox on its behalf, this is no longer the case.'⁷³ Many United Synagogue women, particularly those engaged and active in religious life, are very conscious of the fact that the model of Orthodoxy presented to them by their rabbis and the Orthodox schools attended by their children and grandchildren, is increasingly *haredi* in practice and belief. They often recalled United Synagogue events or practices from their childhood, such as the acceptance of unsupervised cheese as kosher, or mixed dances and concerts featuring female singers held on United Synagogue premises, usually commenting, 'But of course you couldn't do that now.' This trend increases their sense of alienation and confusion. Less active

⁷¹ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 216.

⁷² Yiddish form of *beit din*, a religious court.

⁷³ Alderman, "'Safe' Choice'.

United Synagogue women tended not to remark on the ‘slide to the right’, and may not be aware of it; since they rarely attend synagogue and are not observant themselves, they do not differentiate between ‘religious’ people to their right.

In contrast, *haredi* women rarely raise issues of dissatisfaction and insecurity, and seem much more confident and content in their religious lives and identity. This may be due to the conformist nature of *haredi* society, in which open expression of doubt carries heavy social penalties; it is questionable whether *haredi* women feel comfortable discussing such subjects with an anthropologist from the non-*haredi* community. Alternatively (or simultaneously), the much more unified and inculcated *haredi* ideology, shared and actively promoted by its rabbis and teachers, may be responsible, since the intensive ‘techniques of subjectification’⁷⁴ to which women are exposed from their earliest years effectively mould their self-understanding and religiosity into a *haredi* pattern. Part of the *haredi* ideal is a rejection of modern, secular values; like the Muslim women observed by Saba Mahmood,⁷⁵ they are engaged in constructing a pious self with different goals and methods from those of Western liberal culture. Consequently, they do not experience the tension between the demands of the secular culture of the surrounding non-Jewish world and those of traditional Orthodoxy in the same way as women in the non-*haredi* community. A combination of these factors may account for the greater apparent stability in *haredi* religious life.

The rising level of dissatisfaction among many women in the non-*haredi* Orthodox community seems to have started in the 1980s,⁷⁶ and has undoubtedly been influenced by the wider feminist movement. Earlier tensions between traditional expectations for women and new ideas about women’s role in the wider society were reflected in developments within the British Jewish community: the foundation of (egalitarian) Liberal Judaism in 1911, the growth of synagogue ladies’ guilds and Jewish women’s organizations in the postwar period,⁷⁷ and the move towards egalitarianism in the Reform and Masorti movements in the last few decades. Orthodoxy, conservative in its very essence, has been slow to respond. For decades

⁷⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17 and n. 30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See discussion of the Rosh Hodesh movement, Ch. 4.

⁷⁷ See Ch. 3.

the only way in which Orthodox women could apply feminist ideas was either to throw all their efforts into their professional lives outside the Jewish sphere, creating a paradoxical lifestyle where a top barrister or doctor would sit silently in the women's gallery, or to leave the Orthodox world for another, more egalitarian denomination. The very word 'feminist' carries negative connotations in most Orthodox communities.⁷⁸

As late as 1989, an observer of the Jewish community could still predict 'it is difficult to foresee any great changes in the status of women within Anglo-Jewry', noting that initiatives such as a short-lived feminist Jewish magazine, the academic Jewish Women's History Group,⁷⁹ and a radical Jewish publishing group had made 'virtually no impact on religious Anglo-Jewry'. He added that women with ambitions beyond running the ladies' guild had probably already deserted Orthodoxy for the Progressive movement, and saw nothing but stagnation ahead.⁸⁰ In the 1990s, however, earlier developments in Israel and the United States—the rise of Rosh Hodesh groups, women's sabbath services and Torah readings, and the increase in Jewish educational opportunities for women—finally found an echo in Britain. Inspired by a visit by Dr Alice Shalvi (b. 1926), a British educator living in Israel who had set up the Pelech experimental school for religious girls and founded the Israel Women's Network, several London women set up a Rosh Hodesh group, and later organized two *shabatonim* (weekend events) for women at a hotel in Bournemouth, the latter including women-only sabbath morning services. Katherine Marks, who participated in this first period of Orthodox Jewish women's innovation and growth, recalled the excitement:

Those services, women's services, were a complete revelation, never to be repeated actually, and we had a reunion recently, and a lot of the women were saying how it was a very very important experience. Now those [services] were cross-communal, so of course the Orthodox women were practically

⁷⁸ When the (Orthodox) London School of Jewish Studies ran a course entitled 'The Female Jew', covering topics such as biblical women, the halakhic status of women, and divorce, several men and women who attended (and enjoyed it) expressed discomfort with the title, as it sounded 'too feminist'. For an analysis of the 'counter-feminism' of Habad women and their relationship to Western feminism, see Morris, 'Agents or Victims?' and *Lubavitcher Women*. For the stigmatization of the term 'feminism', see Walby, *Future of Feminism*, 3; in parallel to the phenomenon recorded there, several of my informants preceded feminist statements with the words 'I'm not a feminist but ...'.

⁷⁹ The group collected women's oral histories.

⁸⁰ Brook, *The Club*, ch. 14.

foaming at the mouth—in a good way—and couldn't believe what was going on, and Masorti didn't really exist then, but the *Reform* women were very *moved*, because they'd never had a women's thing, they were used to the egalitarian, but they loved the women's space. [They were] also moved at how moved *we* were.

The mood of excitement and the creative and purposeful activity by women continued with the establishment of the cross-communal Jewish Women's Network and the foundation of the first women's *tefilah* group at Stanmore in 1993.⁸¹ This proved too much for the London Beth Din, however; the women had 'invaded' the male territory of formal prayer services, and all the resources of the Orthodox religious establishment were employed to prevent them holding the services in the synagogue for the next 18 years, and to brand them as rebels. The women were dismayed, since they had not regarded their activities as rebellious or subversive,⁸² but as part of a quest for great participation and spirituality. Most had no desire to confront rabbinic authority, and were anxious to remain members of the Orthodox community in good standing. Gradually the impetus slowed, and most of the groups dwindled; only two women's *tefilah* groups and a few Rosh Hodesh groups, largely monthly social meetings with entertainment or educational components, survived the general decline. Excitement and enthusiasm were replaced by frustration and resentment, or in some cases by withdrawal from Orthodoxy. Several felt that younger women did not share their aspirations: a teacher who had been a central figure in this wave noted:

The younger women see it as all a bit whacky, they're much more conventional, maybe Jewish schooling has made them less imaginative ... you've got a few younger women here who are very energetic, but most of them enjoy Kinloss [United Synagogue] [...] We had a vision, we wanted something different for our daughters, but our daughters didn't want it.⁸³

From 2005, however, a new wave of women's innovation, activity, and creativity has developed, including women's Megillah readings, new Rosh Hodesh groups, and a revival of the Stanmore women's *tefilah* group, as well as a new range of pietistic activities, such as *berakhah* parties and *halah* parties, which are more typical of the *haredi* community. Institutional changes in the United Synagogue and Federation,

⁸¹ See Ch. 4.

⁸² Their rabbi supported and encouraged the project.

⁸³ Sharon Jastrow, interview.

whereby women can serve as synagogue board members and (in the United Synagogue) synagogue presidents, point to a greater acceptance of a wider role for women in the non-*haredi* community.⁸⁴

In June 2013 two significant events occurred: a British branch of the American-based Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) was founded in London, led by Rebetsn Dina Brawer, who organizes regular seminars and events, and the first partnership *minyan* in Britain was held, with women leading parts of public worship.⁸⁵ Also, an increasing number of younger married women are performing some of the domestic sabbath rituals that used to be the exclusive preserve of men.⁸⁶ The current developments are different in character from the 1990s ‘movement’, not least because non-*haredi* men are involved in some of the new activities, such as partnership *minyanim*, alongside women. Though *haredi* women create all their innovations in a women’s space, both women and men from the left wing of non-*haredi* Orthodoxy are beginning to seek religious activities and rituals that are not framed by gender segregation, but redefine gender roles in a shared space. British Orthodox women are currently experiencing far-reaching changes in the available options for religious participation and self-expression. It is too early to know how far the changes will go and how successful they will be; there are already rumbles of opposition from the Orthodox rabbinic establishment.⁸⁷

Defining terms: talking about the Anglo-Jewish community

This complex and fluid situation makes it difficult to develop an adequate set of definitions for categorizing non-*haredi* Orthodox Jews in Britain. Should a non-practising United Synagogue member be described as Orthodox? How would one differentiate between United Synagogue women who cover their hair with a wig,

⁸⁴ See Ch. 3.

⁸⁵ See Ch. 4.

⁸⁶ See Ch. 5.

⁸⁷ In late 2013, the head of the Federation *beit din*, Dayan Lichtenstein, prohibited women from dancing with a Torah scroll on Simhat Torah; and a prominent educator was barred from speaking in a series of lectures for women organized jointly by a United and an independent synagogue, on the grounds that she was ‘associated with partnership *minyanim*’. In early 2014, the London Beth Din ordered the rabbi of Golders Green United Synagogue to discontinue the practice he had introduced of carrying the Torah scroll through the women’s section before the Torah reading, claiming that this was an innovation and therefore forbidden.

keep kosher households, observe the sabbath and all the festivals, and attend Talmud lessons and those who do not cover their hair, only attend synagogue on the High Holidays, cannot read Hebrew, and light sabbath candles on Friday night but shop on Saturday morning? The terms ‘observant’ and ‘non-observant’ seem appropriate here, but they only measure one axis of religious life, that of practice; what if the first group does not actually believe in God or the divine origin of the Torah, but the second does? Should we add terms such as ‘non-believing’ and ‘believing’ to measure the axis of religious belief? Personal religiosity or spirituality also varies: even if both groups of United Synagogue women believe in God and the divine origin of the Torah, what terms would mark the fact that the first might have no interest in a personal relationship with the divine, while the second might wish to develop their own spirituality and live in the presence of God? In addition to the fact that this deeply personal and private aspect of religious life is particularly hard to investigate, the terms ‘devout’, ‘religious’, or ‘spiritual’ and ‘spiritually indifferent’ are once again limited to this axis alone, and do not necessarily imply a particular level of practical observance, or a defined set of beliefs.⁸⁸

Even if we adopt the binary definitions presented above, or revisualize each set as the poles of a continuum, they do not provide a satisfactory way of talking about variation over time in an individual’s religious practice, belief, and inner life; as Sarah Beynor has observed, ‘trajectories of observance and identification are salient within Orthodox communities’,⁸⁹ but are often difficult to identify and describe.

Many attempts have been made to define sets of terms with which to categorize Orthodoxy, but none adequately represents the experience of Jewish women in Britain, especially since most focus on denominational affiliation to the exclusion of other axes of religious life, and very few are accompanied by an analysis of what the terms actually denote. Analysing the causes of the ‘slide to the right’ among American Orthodox Jews, Samuel Heilman uses the binary categories ‘modern

⁸⁸ The interesting ‘life-as religion’ and ‘subjective-life spirituality’ categories used in Heelas and Woodhead, *Spiritual Revolution*, which examined trends in a homogenous, largely Christian town, would not be as useful in an Orthodox Jewish context. The ‘life-as’ component, in which ‘conformity to external authority’ is the key value, is a *sine qua non* of Orthodoxy, even though some individual Orthodox women may seek to increase the ‘subjective-life’ aspect, in which the key value is ‘authentic connection with the inner depths of one’s unique life-in-relation’ (ch. 1).

⁸⁹ Beynor, *Becoming Frum*, 9.

Orthodox’ and ‘Haredi Orthodox’ (also calling the latter ‘contra-acculturative’ and ‘enclavist’), but provides no definitions or other categorizations.⁹⁰ Sarah Beynor, looking at newly religious Jews in America, identifies several social axes, including Orthodox and non-Orthodox; ‘trajectories of observance’, for which she gives the categories ‘*frum* from birth, *gerim* [converts], *ba’alei teshuvah* [newly religious], and *hozrim beshe’alah* [newly secular]’; and ‘Modern Orthodox and Black Hat’, which she describes as ‘a continuum between “Modern Orthodox” Jews at one end and “Black Hat” Jews at the other, based on observance, insularity, gender ideology, and, especially, cultural practices’.⁹¹ The recognition of a continuum, rather than discrete categories, is helpful here and can be applied to the British Jewish community, as can the concept of ‘trajectories of observance’, attempting to describe the dynamic and sometimes changing nature of individuals’ religious lives; the very notion of the multiplicity of axes along which ‘religiousness’ can be measured is of central importance, as noted above.

Research on Jews in Britain has also encountered the dilemma of defining useful categories. Examining the loss of the old United Synagogue version of Orthodoxy, Miri Freud-Kandel labels it ‘spiritist Orthodoxy’ and contrasts it with an undefined ‘centrist Orthodoxy’.⁹² She defines the former as:

a distinct religious position in Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, [concentrating] on the importance of maintaining Jewish identity intact and preserving inherited traditions without directing too much attention to the minutiae of religious practices. [...] It should not be viewed as a principled theological position on the left wing of Orthodox Judaism, which is demarcated by the Reform movement and Masorti Judaism.⁹³

This seems to be less a definition of a movement within Orthodoxy and more of a description of the old-style United Synagogue; the traditionalist position she outlines

⁹⁰ Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*.

⁹¹ Beynor, *Becoming Frum*, 9. ‘Black Hat’ corresponds to the term *haredi* used here.

⁹² Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism*, 84. The term ‘spiritist’ is intended to convey that adherents of this type of Orthodoxy were more interested in the ‘spirit’ than the practice of the religion, but given the widely-documented lack of interest in theology and intellectual matters among British Jews, this seems wishful thinking rather than accurate description. See Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 264-6.

⁹³ Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism*, 84. Interestingly, she makes no mention of Modern Orthodoxy, perhaps because few British Jews align themselves with this movement, although those who do so are often at the forefront of innovations. Many of those identifying themselves as Modern Orthodox have spent several years in Israel or the USA, where Modern Orthodoxy is far more common.

is now disappearing with increasing rapidity, unable to withstand the more strident certainties of stricter versions of Orthodoxy.

A brief 1986 study of British Jewry simply used the terms ‘Right-wing Orthodox’, ‘Central Orthodox’, and ‘Sephardi’ to cover the Orthodox sector.⁹⁴ A slightly more sophisticated survey of the social and political attitudes of British Jews carried out in 1995 used the following eclectic set of categories, with some minimal definitions:

Non-practising (i.e. secular) Jew; Just Jewish; Progressive Jew (e.g. Liberal, Reform); ‘Traditional’ (i.e. not strictly Orthodox); Strictly Orthodox (e.g. would *not* turn on a light on Shabbat).⁹⁵

Tellingly, a 2011 study by the IJPR included a footnote:

In the past, it was easier to differentiate clearly between ‘Central Orthodoxy’ and ‘Strict Orthodoxy’ [...] Whilst the categories remain useful, the distinctions between them have become increasingly blurred in recent times.⁹⁶

An IJPR study by David Graham of ‘the outlook of London’s Jews’ published in 2003 critiqued this set of terms, noting that ‘Previous labelling typologies [...] represented *nominal* scales, that is to say, they consisted of descriptive, categorical items only [...] being affiliation driven, this approach becomes rapidly dominated by the all-encompassing “Traditionals” and tends to miss the non-affiliated.’⁹⁷ Graham observed that these nominal categories were usually treated as though they were ordinal, i.e. ranked in a sequence from ‘more’ to ‘less’, and that they were imprecise:

What is the difference between the categories ‘non-practising Jew’ and ‘Just Jewish’, if any at all? Is ‘Traditional’ more religious than ‘Progressive’? What indeed do we even mean by ‘religious’ in this instance: more observant, more affiliated or what?⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Waterman and Kosmin, *British Jewry in the Eighties*, 28. The only other categories were ‘Reform’ and ‘Liberal’, with no mention of Masorti.

⁹⁵ Miller, Shmool, and Lerman, *Social and Political Attitudes*. Once again, Masorti does not appear; in addition, the example given for ‘Strictly Orthodox’ of not using electricity on the sabbath would surprise many Masorti and United Synagogue Jews who observe this prohibition but would never dream of labelling themselves as ‘Strictly Orthodox’!

⁹⁶ Abramson, Graham, and Boyd, *Key Trends*, 5 n. 1.

⁹⁷ Graham, *Secular or Religious?*, 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Graham proposed an ordinal scale based on ‘outlook’ (similar to the ‘personal religiosity axis’ mentioned above), with the categories ‘religious’, ‘somewhat religious’, ‘somewhat secular’, and ‘secular’, used in the IJPR 2002 survey of almost 3,000 London Jews. Acknowledging that these categories rested on self-definition by respondents, he argued that since respondents ‘placed themselves into categories rather than having (arbitrary) categories imposed upon them’, empirical evidence of the ‘Jewishness’ of London’s Jews was available for the first time. He noted:

The analysis [...] demonstrates that the cause-and-effect relationship between religiosity and Jewish practice is unclear, and that no single variable, or set of variables, can adequately describe the multifaceted nature of being a Jew in Greater London. Being thus self-defined, the concept of outlook takes on a complexity all of its own. If two Jews choose independently to define themselves as secular, they may in reality exhibit very different Jewish characteristics.⁹⁹

It is doubtful whether (silently) self-defined categories dependent on the personal interpretations of questionnaire respondents are more likely to deliver ‘empirical’ findings than undefined categories imposed on respondents, though they are certainly very useful both in providing some *qualitative* sense of individuals’ self-definition and personal religiosity and in problematizing the unexamined categories used by earlier studies. A table measuring these ‘outlook’-based categories against the more traditional denominational categories indicates both the potential and the complexity of a multi-axial analysis:¹⁰⁰

Table 2.1 Comparison of denomination with self-chosen categories

Denomination	Secular %	Somewhat Secular %	Somewhat Religious %	Religious %	Base
None	40	14	5	3	468
Haredi/Independent Orthodox Federation	1	1	2	20	83
Mainstream Orthodox/United Synagogue	4	4	6	7	138
Masorti	28	47	64	60	1,390
Reform	2	6	5	2	116
Other	23	26	16	7	567
Total	2	2	2	1	58
	100	100	100	100	2,820

⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 15, Table 9.

It is notable that 28 percent of self-identified ‘secular Jews’ nonetheless belonged to the United Synagogue, and that, even more remarkably, 1 percent of them belonged to the *haredi*/independent Orthodox. The fact that 7 percent of those who defined themselves as ‘religious’ belong to the Reform movement also highlights the problematic nature of the link between denomination and ‘religiosity’. The equally problematic link between ‘outlook’/personal religiosity and religious practice is illustrated by the survey’s measurement of the observance of four religious ‘markers’ (lighting sabbath candles, attending a Passover Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, and keeping kosher) against the four ‘outlook’ categories: 47 percent of the ‘secular’ attended a Seder every year, 30 percent of them fasted every Yom Kippur, and 22 percent kept a kosher home, while 11 percent of the ‘religious’ did not keep kosher at home and 16 percent ate non-kosher meat outside the home ‘frequently’ or ‘occasionally’.¹⁰¹

Given this complex, shifting reality, I have not attempted to construct a rigid, all-encompassing system of precisely defined categories for this analysis, particularly since it has no pretensions to rigorous quantitative analysis. Wherever possible, women’s self-definitions are used, but where these were not forthcoming or obvious I have tried to use individual terms consistently, and to distinguish between different axes of religious life.¹⁰²

In order to provide a general set of terms with which to characterize different sectors of the Orthodox community, I will employ a representation of the spectrum of Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, ranging from an ethnically-based identification with traditional Anglo-Jewish ritual practice combined with acceptance of the wider society’s Western-liberal ethos at one pole (‘traditionalist’), to a religiously-defined practice and ethos that consciously rejects the Western-liberal ethos at the other pole (‘*haredi*’), with the middle ground occupied by a religiously-defined practice and ethos that attempts to negotiate coexistence with the Western-liberal ethos (‘Modern

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 13-15. Unfortunately the full data on ‘outlook’ in relation to these four key practices were not published.

¹⁰² For an examination of the problem of defining terms with which to discuss religion and spirituality in the modern context, see Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, ch. 2: “‘Spirituality’ and ‘Religion’: What Are We Talking About?”.

Orthodox’). In discussing other axes of religious life, I have used the following sets of terms:

- To denote denominational affiliation I have used the institutional labels of ‘United Synagogue’, ‘Federation’, and ‘Union’ or ‘UOHC’, as well as the non-institutional ‘independent Orthodox’ and ‘*haredi*’.
- To describe religious practice and worldview (*hashkafah*), I have used *haredi* again (since denomination, practice, and religious outlook are closely linked in this community), while reserving ‘mainstream’ or ‘mainstream Orthodox’ for non-*haredi* Orthodoxy. ‘Observant’ and ‘non-observant’ refer to observable religious practice, such as keeping kosher or fasting on Yom Kippur. Styles within ‘mainstream Orthodoxy’ are marked with the terms ‘Modern Orthodox’, implying a conscious choice to follow the aspiration of integrating Judaism and non-Jewish culture, and ‘traditional’, denoting a largely unconscious or un-intellectualized acceptance of family and community practice and outlook, which, though ostensibly religious, is actually based on ethnic and identitarian considerations. I have avoided using the common term ‘Centrist Orthodoxy’ since it is unclear which ‘centre’ is meant here, nor is it obvious where the boundary between this and ‘Modern Orthodox’ lies.
- Beliefs and faith are discussed individually, rather than combining them with practice and *hashkafah*, to acknowledge that they do not always correlate with practice as often assumed, let alone form coherent systems.¹⁰³ Not many women discussed this aspect of their religious lives, though sometimes remarkable divergences from classical Jewish beliefs became apparent, as in some of the opinions about angels expressed by women who engaged in *berakhah* parties and other quasi-thaumaturgic practices.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 308-9 notes: ‘it is optimistic to think that people have an ordered set of beliefs about a particular endeavour which forms a consistent set with other beliefs which together describe the totality of thought and action. People are much fuzzier, and more complex, than that.’

¹⁰⁴ See Chs. 4 and 6.

- Personal religiosity is discussed in terms of ‘religious’ or ‘devout’ versus ‘religiously indifferent’ tendencies; again, this was not always obvious.

Previous research on British Orthodox women

Unsurprisingly, given the general invisibility of women’s religious lives described in Chapter 1, very little research has been done on this subject in Britain. Surveys of the British Jewish community, or parts of it, occasionally devote a paragraph or two to women, though their practice of and attitudes to religion are rarely mentioned. A useful example is Geoffrey Alderman’s *Modern British Jewry*, which devotes three pages to the subject, with another four pages on the problem of *agunot*.¹⁰⁵ Writing of the 1980s, he notes:

In the orthodox home the Jewish housewife reigns supreme. In the synagogue she is literally superfluous [...] in the world of centrist orthodoxy, as exemplified by the United Synagogue, the matter became contentious. Girls brought up within this centrist orthodoxy had taken full advantage of the educational opportunities open to women in British society after 1945. They obtained university education, and pursued professional careers whilst rearing children and maintaining orthodox homes. Jewish women whose career achievements had secured for them a status in wider society became resentful of their subordinate position within Anglo-Jewry. For some, younger, women, this resulted in defections to the progressive movement. But this solution, fraught with the obvious risk of future difficulties for their offspring in terms of Jewish identity, did not appeal to the majority.¹⁰⁶

Alderman goes on to describe the ‘women’s renaissance’ of the 1990s and the commissioning of the Preston Report.

This document, published in 1994 and officially titled *Women in the Jewish Community: Review and Recommendations*, remains ‘the most exhaustive investigation ever undertaken into the feelings of Anglo-Jewish women about their spiritual needs and religious status’.¹⁰⁷ It was commissioned by the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, and led by Rosalind Preston (b. 1935), the first female vice-president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and was based on information gathered

¹⁰⁵ An *agunah* (lit.: ‘chained woman’, pl. *agunot*) is a woman whose husband refuses to grant her a Jewish divorce (*get*).

¹⁰⁶ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 402-3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 404.

across the denominational spectrum by ‘taskforces’ on education, synagogue and religious matters, social issues, the family, and Jewish divorce. More than 180 women, organized in groups across Britain, were involved in gathering and processing information. Over 100 recommendations were made, many on religious issues, such as requests for clarification on women’s role in rituals such as saying *kadish* (the mourner’s prayer) and that women be included in the planning and refurbishing of synagogues. The bulk of the report documented women’s opinions, feelings, and desires on a wide range of issues, from celebrating the birth of a girl to the problems of being a single Jewish woman, and a chapter was devoted to ‘Spiritual Needs: The Orthodox Perspective’.¹⁰⁸ The authors reported:

While the majority of older women are content to preserve the status quo—with all its attendant features—the ladies’ gallery, Mechitzah, ladies’ guilds and catering duties, there is a creeping malaise among the next generation. A perception is growing among younger Orthodox women, of the synagogue as a ‘men’s club’, controlling, inhibiting and unfairly restricting the scope of women’s involvement.¹⁰⁹

Issues such as sadness at not being able to mark a *yortsayt* (anniversary of a relative’s death) in public, feelings of exclusion on Simhat Torah, and regret at not having had a good Jewish education gave support to this warning. Many of the issues and dissatisfactions recorded in the report appeared among my interviewees. After the report’s publication, there were allegations that some requirements originally specified had been ‘downgraded’ to recommendations and that parts of the report had been rewritten to make it more acceptable.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless it remains a unique record of Jewish women’s opinions, and I have used it extensively.

Rewritten or not, few of the Preston Report’s recommendations were implemented, and in 2008 Rosalind Preston asked the Board of Deputies to revisit the work carried out 15 years earlier, to see what had changed and pursue the most relevant issues. The resulting report is generally known as the Women’s Review, although officially titled *Connection, Continuity and Community: British Jewish Women Speak Out*. On

¹⁰⁸ While no reason is given in the report for this focus on the Orthodox, I imagine that it is for the same reason that my own research does the same; opportunities for religious expression in the Masorti, Reform, and Liberal movements, while not always completely egalitarian, are far greater than those available to Orthodox women.

¹⁰⁹ Preston Report, 29.

¹¹⁰ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 404-5.

this occasion an online survey facilitated by SurveyMonkey was used, with over 700 respondents (7 percent of whom were men). Once again, women from across the country and the denominational spectrum gave their opinions; 88 percent belonged to a synagogue, and of these, 57 percent were Orthodox. After two pages providing a demographic overview, the remaining 22 pages of the report provide quotations from women's responses, identified by region, age, marital status, and denominational affiliation:

I think women need to be taught how to daven [pray]. Many of them never really learn, so in shul they talk, and then wonder why their kids wriggle around.

Outer NW London, married, 29, Orthodox, religious

If we understand what we are saying in shul, it would make it more meaningful.

North London, separated, 56, Orthodox, religious

Once again, though short, and largely an anthology of quotations, this report is invaluable for recording women's voices and concerns, and has been an important resource.

The only other published study of British Orthodox women's religious lives of which I am aware is a paper by Jennifer Cousineau that examines the far-reaching changes in experience of the sabbath occasioned by the construction of the North-West London Eruv.¹¹¹ Though dealing with both sexes, her paper focuses on women because the changes they record are far more striking than those experienced by men. She notes that many women with small children had felt imprisoned on the sabbath, but now experienced a sense of release and joy, enabling them to match religious expectations of the sabbath as holy and pleasurable. Although the paper only covers one facet of women's religious lives, it provides a very valuable example of women's opinions and understandings, and highlights how their perception of religious issues often differs fundamentally from that of Jewish men.

¹¹¹ Cousineau, 'Domestication'. An *eruv* is a halakhically defined construction linking private and public areas that permits Jews to carry objects and children in public areas on the sabbath and Yom Kippur; in the absence of an *eruv*, such carrying is not permitted. See below, Ch. 3.

Methodology of the research project

Against this background and using the working definitions outlined above, I explored the nature of Orthodox women's religious lives from 2009 to 2014, with some investigation into developments in the 1990s, using the methods outlined below. Since I belong to the community that I was studying, a brief reflection on my position, responsibilities, and attitudes is essential.

In the 1980s and 1990s, critiques of anthropological/ethnographic methods highlighted the problematic nature of much classic ethnographic fieldwork and writing, including the representation of societies as static, suppression of multiple voices within social arenas, and exoticizing or orientalizing attitudes to the 'other' being studied.¹¹² There were also concerns about the absence of any representation of the experience of fieldwork, and the silence surrounding the relationship between anthropologists and their 'subjects', including its political and emotional aspects and the effect these had on the research itself, as summed up elegantly by the writer Ursula Le Guin:

The idea that objective observation can be performed only by an observer totally free of subjectivity involves an ideal of inhuman purity which we now recognize as being, fortunately, unattainable. But the dilemma of the subjective practitioner of objectivity persists, and presents itself to anthropologists in its most acute and painful form: the relationship between observer and observed when both of them are human.¹¹³

Another aspect of the rethinking of fieldwork exposes the split between 'work' and 'life', with the former usually constituting the subject matter of anthropological texts. Gillian Goslinga and Gelya Frank ask, 'Must we accept the dichotomy of "life" and "work" that constitutes, yet also confounds, the experience of fieldwork?'¹¹⁴

The nature of my research, exploring the religious lives of women in my own community, necessitated a thorough consideration of my relationship with the women with whom I live and work, the balance between 'life' and 'work', and the

¹¹² e.g. Clifford and Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture*; Ortner, 'Ethnography'; Okely and Callaway, *Anthropology and Autobiography*.

¹¹³ Le Guin, 'Indian Uncles', 12.

¹¹⁴ Goslinga and Frank, 'In the Shadows', p. xii.

nature of ‘objectivity’ and scientific rigour. As Charles Hale has noted,¹¹⁵ the academic ideal of scientific rigour actually includes two aspects: ‘the claim to disinterested, neutral, objective social inquiry’, which is illusory at best and misleading at worst, and ‘methodological propriety: careful adherence to established rules for collecting and interpreting research data’, which is essential.

Since I live in the community I am studying, I do not have the option of regarding its women as ‘others’ whom I can investigate and then ‘write up’ at a safe distance; my social network and study network overlap, and I will continue to live as part of the community after concluding this research project.¹¹⁶ Nor do I feel disinterested or neutral; this study is largely prompted by my dissatisfaction at the restrictions on religious options for women in the Anglo-Jewish Orthodox community, and by my desire to understand why these restrictions are so embedded and often unquestioned, and what Jewish women feel and do about them. Although not allied to any formal organization or body, I could be regarded as an example of the ‘activist anthropologist’ promoted by Hale, particularly since I am active in the community. A brief consideration of my position is thus necessary to underpin the methodological approaches I have used.

Since I did not grow up in the London Jewish community and lived for 17 years in Jerusalem, I am an outsider here; but since I am religiously observant, teach Jewish subjects widely,¹¹⁷ and belong to an extensive Jewish social network, I am also an insider. Having come from a tightly-knit, mainly English-speaking synagogue community in Jerusalem that championed women’s ritual participation within the limits of *halakhah* and included several outstanding women teachers and leaders, I was somewhat taken aback by the conservative Anglo-Jewish community, in which most women play traditional roles and display little interest in increasing their participation in public religious contexts. In the early 2000s, my husband and I attempted to introduce some of the practices we had followed in Jerusalem, such as prayer services that enlarged women’s roles, and though these attracted 50 or so

¹¹⁵ C. R. Hale, ‘In Praise of “Reckless Minds”’, 116.

¹¹⁶ Several informants have expressed interest in reading my research results.

¹¹⁷ I am a Teaching Fellow at London School of Jewish Studies, a Modern Orthodox centre for informal adult education that reaches about 500-600 students annually, and often teach in synagogues in north-west London and elsewhere.

people in London, they remained marginal and had little impact. As I learnt about previous similar attempts, which had also lacked widespread support, I became aware of a diversity of attitudes, goals, and frustrations among Orthodox Jewish women, and also of a variety of individual, generally family- or home-based practices that were very much part of women's religious lives, even though often described by both women and men as 'superstitions'. Most were completely unfamiliar to me, and my research explores how they form part of women's religious identity and constitute a field of agency. Other little-known practices, such as women's *berakhah* parties and 'partnership *minyanim*', have arisen recently, raising the question of how change and innovation takes place in a conservative community, and what factors determine its acceptance or rejection. My role as both an agent and an observer of change embodies my 'double' gaze, from within and without.

Much has been written on the advantages and disadvantages of studying one's own society,¹¹⁸ with 'native' anthropologists agonizing over the difficulties of preserving distance from one's subjects and avoiding emotional entanglement. In contrast, my own location simultaneously within and on the margin of the Jewish community of north-west London has proved essential to my research. Hannah Knox recorded her fears over the 'loss of distance' between herself as researcher and her subjects who became work colleagues during her research in a small company, but came to realize that it is 'a commitment to analysis that creates the sense of distance and not the degree of shared knowledge between a researcher and the subjects of her research'—a formulation I found useful.¹¹⁹ In my case, the direction was the exact opposite, a form of 'anthropology from the inside out': instead of gradually becoming incorporated in the studied group, I chose to take advantage of my membership of the community to develop my 'double' gaze, retaining and sharpening my 'outsider', critical role. In addition, as an observant Jew, I have experienced most areas of women's religious lives and have a personal 'baseline' to which other women's experiences may be compared.

Disadvantages of being a 'native' researcher included my own religious commitments: I could not always observe what was happening around me in contexts

¹¹⁸ See Ohnuki-Tierney, "'Native' Anthropologists"; Soon Kim, 'Can an Anthropologist Go Home Again?'

¹¹⁹ Knox, 'Imitative Participation', [p. 6].

such as public prayer services, where I had a personal obligation to concentrate on prayer, for instance. Moreover, since many people know me as a teacher in the community and advocate of women's participation in religious life, interviewees sometimes reacted to my public persona: one woman who disagrees with me on women's ritual participation became rather defensive when I asked her to describe her view of the role of Jewish women, and had to be reassured that I was interested in hearing her opinions rather than promoting my own. Conversely, those women with whom I had participated in women's *tefilah* groups or Megillah readings would treat me as an ally, expressing their frustrations with restrictions on women's religious opportunities, and voicing pointed criticism of the religious authorities (particularly before the recording machine was switched on and after it was switched off).

In order to explore the sphere of women's religious lives more fully, I combined a number of approaches to illuminate different aspects of women's experiences and to enable their voices and understandings of their experience to be heard. Five principal techniques were used, which often intersected and contributed to each other.

1. Participant observation

This classic technique of anthropological investigation was the obvious and natural choice for the basis of my research, though it takes on a particular colouring from my insider status and the fact that my (informal) observations extend back to my arrival in London in 1997.

In addition to involvement in activities usually defined as characteristic of women's Jewish lives,¹²⁰ I had participated in women's *tefilah* groups and women's Megillah readings,¹²¹ both in Israel and in London, for many years before starting to research them in a formal context. I experienced no difficulty in attending the recently inaugurated *berakhah* (blessings) parties, being welcomed as a new participant; since these and other women's activities are advertised on a local Orthodox email list, I

¹²⁰ See Ch. 1.

¹²¹ See Ch. 4.

found it easy to identify women's communal activities for research. In most situations I was not regarded as an outsider; even in the exceptions (e.g. as an Ashkenazi woman attending a Sefardi *hilulah*,¹²² and as a Modern Orthodox woman interviewing hasidic women), my degree of distance was less than and different from the likely experience of a non-Jewish researcher. Women generally felt comfortable talking to me and answering questions in their own terms, with none of the 'translated expressions' used when speaking to non-Jews.¹²³ I sometimes felt emotional or intellectual discomfort in attending certain events, but my conviction that Judaism is not a monolithic faith enabled me to make the effort to understand those who enjoyed such practices and to respect their opinions and emotions. My own commitment to and involvement in Judaism underlies my desire to understand the full range of Jewish women's religious lives and the factors that shape them, and I share commitment to Jewish identity and practice with the women with whom I interact.

Participation in Jewish communal life also led to increased opportunities for finding women to interview, my second approach.

2. Semi-structured interviews

I conducted interviews with 31 individuals, mostly women; twenty of these were recorded, and most of the others were over the telephone or by means of Skype.¹²⁴ Most interviewees have been given pseudonyms. In keeping with the qualitative nature of my research, I used a combination of purposive sampling strategies,¹²⁵ focusing on two principal types:

(1) *maximum variation sampling*, in order to investigate the experiences and attitudes of a wide variety of Orthodox Jewish women—young, middle-aged, and old;

¹²² A celebration on the anniversary of a kabbalistic rabbi's death, typical of North African Jews.

¹²³ Anglo-Jews typically modify their speech when talking to non-Jews, substituting 'synagogue' for *shul*, 'Passover' for Pesah, and so on, as well as avoiding Yiddish words. An account of the same phenomenon of 'Orthodox style-shifting' in America may be found in Beynor, *Becoming Frum*, 46-8; the author notes, 'In the Orthodox community, people change their language significantly depending on who they are speaking to.' (p. 46).

¹²⁴ Approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee, Project ID No. 2578/001. I interviewed two (male) rabbis in order to explore their understanding of and views on women's religious roles and some women's practices. See list of interviewees in Appendix 1.

¹²⁵ Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 230-46.

unmarried and married; with children and with no children; from the ‘right’ and ‘left’ of the Orthodox community; *haredi*, traditionalist, and Modern Orthodox; women with considerable Jewish education and women with very little.

(2) *expert sampling*, in order to gain insight into aspects of women’s religious lives that might be rarer or more difficult to find out about. For instance, I chose to interview a *mikveh* (ritual bath) attendant, in order to learn about women’s experience of *mikveh* and ‘family purity’ laws,¹²⁶ since this is an intensely private subject that many women would not have wanted to discuss. Similarly, I deliberately interviewed several women who had been involved in founding and running Stanmore Women’s Tefilah Group, or in organizing women’s Megillah readings, in order to learn about their history and activity, the emotions and reasons associated with their foundation, and their reception in the wider community.

The interviews were semi-structured, and based on a ‘responsive interviewing’ model, in which interviewer and interviewee form a relationship, with ethical obligations for the former; the goal is to produce depth rather than breadth of understanding; and the research design remains flexible and responsive to circumstances.¹²⁷ I started by asking a few basic questions about background and Jewish education, and then gave a few prompts and standard questions from time to time,¹²⁸ letting the interviewee take the lead in talking about aspects of Jewish life important to her. I sometimes asked for their opinions and experiences in particular areas, such as synagogue attendance, or the Simhat Torah festival.

The interviews complement and expand the data from participant observation; analysed in terms of interpretative phenomenological analysis, whose aim is to ‘explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world’,¹²⁹ they allowed me to examine the meanings that particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants. Interviews enabled me to look behind the

¹²⁶ See Ch. 1 n. 15.

¹²⁷ Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 30. Interview techniques were largely based on this book, with some use of Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*; I also benefited from the advice of Prof. Joe Cain, of UCL Department of Science and Technology Studies.

¹²⁸ Standard general questions included ‘What does your Jewish week look like?’ and ‘What do you think is the role of a Jewish woman?’.

¹²⁹ Smith and Osborn, ‘Interpretative phenomenological analysis’, 51.

surface of events, and to explore why women do or do *not* do certain things, as well as their frustrations and their understandings of Jewish women's roles. They also allowed me to follow individual trajectories, both towards greater religious observance and away from it; in several cases women described how particular events or people in their lives had influenced their practice of and attitude towards Judaism. Interviews would also sometimes make me aware of scheduled events, or open up possibilities of new contacts and interviewees.

3. Questionnaires on 'folk practices'

It proved almost impossible to find a neutral, non-judgemental term that describes these practices, which include customs such as tying a red ribbon on a child's clothing to protect it from the evil eye and wearing an amulet to aid conception. After coming across several examples in casual conversation, I decided to develop a questionnaire to provide a qualitative rather than quantitative guide on what women actually do and on how widespread such practices are.¹³⁰ I found that the same practice would be described as 'superstition' by one respondent and as 'mainstream' or 'halakhic' by another, underlining the difficulty of naming, describing, and analysing this area of women's practice, though of course such descriptions revealed much about women's attitudes to customs.¹³¹ Several of these customs are also observed by men (for instance, covering the mirrors in a house of mourning), but in this case they are often defined as 'official' customs (*minhagim*), and may be discussed in halakhic texts. Far fewer specifically female practices, such as those associated with pregnancy or birth, appear in halakhic works. Though many practices documented in the questionnaires can be traced back to pre-war Europe or even to the mediaeval or rabbinic periods,¹³² some appear to be of recent origin, such as baking a cake during labour in order to help childless friends conceive.¹³³

My first list, of some sixty customs, was developed by asking participants at a lecture at the Limmud conference on 27 December 2009 whether they knew of any practices of this kind. I based the questionnaire on these and encouraged respondents to add

¹³⁰ The first page of the questionnaire appears as Appendix 2.

¹³¹ See Ch. 6.

¹³² e.g. the use of red thread for fertility or protection; see Teman, 'Red String', and Ch. 6.

¹³³ See entry in Appendix 3.

practices that did not appear; by August 2012 it had expanded to about 200 customs, most associated with women.¹³⁴ I collected 100 completed questionnaires.

Since the questionnaire had expanded over time, in summer 2013 I contacted as many of the earlier respondents as possible, and asked them to complete the newest version in order to chart their responses to customs about which I had not asked earlier. About 25 percent of respondents could not be reached.¹³⁵ Notably, some respondents who filled out the new questionnaire gave different answers to those given previously, for instance ‘I do this’ in place of an earlier ‘I’ve never heard of this’, or vice versa, thus underlining the impressionistic nature of this survey.¹³⁶ In addition, the phone conversations involved became ‘mini-interviews’, with a chance for the women to express their feelings about certain customs, where they had learned them, variations in their personal practice over time, and their general perception of the significance of this type of practice.

The questionnaire is divided into rough categories grouping the customs by goal or context, entitled: ‘avoiding the evil eye or ensuring good luck’, ‘to get pregnant’, ‘during pregnancy’, ‘birth’, ‘babies and small children’, ‘first period’, ‘medical or illness’, ‘death and funerals’, ‘to get married’, and ‘miscellaneous’. Many in the last category are associated with the sabbath and festivals. Respondents were asked whether they practised the custom themselves, had family members who practised it, or had only heard about it. Space was provided for comments, and respondents were encouraged to write down their understandings of the practices, and where they had learned about them; about 25 percent completed this section.

The questionnaire provided a prompt for several interviewees, most of whom filled one out before the interview, and inspired them to discuss something that they had often ‘not thought about’. Women thoroughly enjoyed filling out the questionnaires, often laughing at some of the customs or remembering relatives to whom they had

¹³⁴ For the full list of customs, with bibliographical annotations, see Appendix 3.

¹³⁵ Some questionnaires had been completed anonymously; in other cases respondents had not given any contact details. About 17 respondents failed to reply to email requests to answer supplementary questions.

¹³⁶ This might be because they had recently started to practise this custom. It should also be noted that when respondents said they had heard of a custom of which they had been unaware in their first set of answers, this could be because they had heard of it from the questionnaire itself!

been important; they were keenly interested and often greeted a familiar custom like an old friend, discussing it with a warmth and intimacy that did not often appear when they talked about their experiences in synagogue or in more formal contexts. However, not all the answers necessarily reflect actual practice; in some instances, women may have denied knowledge of a custom they practise which they fear would be regarded with ridicule. A notable instance was the custom of a mother slapping a daughter when she gets her first period: a mother and daughter who answered this gave contradictory replies, with the daughter noting that her mother had indeed slapped her, and the mother recording that she had never heard of this custom. Such disparity of response may well reveal changing attitudes: perhaps a custom once seen as standard now appears unacceptable in the light of changing attitudes to hitting children?

4. Monitoring of community email list

At the beginning of my research I signed up to ‘EdgwareK’, an email list serving the north-west London Jewish community. Some posts proved useful in locating women’s religious events (such as the *berakhah* parties described in Chapter 4). Posts on the list often requested prayer or ritual actions, such as baking *halot*,¹³⁷ on behalf of ill or injured individuals, and occasionally someone would post a ‘new’ *segulah* with recommendations to use it,¹³⁸ or would inquire whether anyone knew of a *segulah* for a particular purpose.¹³⁹ One woman posts a monthly list of individuals for whom prayers are requested. Other interesting posts included advertisements for *gemahs*, originally interest-free loan societies but now including all sorts of tiny loan societies.¹⁴⁰ Most are run by women, and are often founded in memory of a deceased relation or friend.

¹³⁷ See Ch. 4.

¹³⁸ The Hebrew word *segulah* has a wide semantic range. The Alkalai dictionary defines it as ‘treasure; characteristic, trait, property, quality, virtue, attribute; idiosyncrasy, peculiarity; remedy’; in popular usage, it refers to a practice or action that confers a spiritual remedy or blessing. See Ch. 6 for examples.

¹³⁹ The following request appeared on 23 Aug. 2012: ‘Do you know where I can get hold of one of these necklaces that are a *segulah* during pregnancy to prevent miscarriage as my wife is pregnant?’ This refers to the use of red stones or rubies to facilitate birth, enhance fertility, or prevent miscarriage, a practice documented in the questionnaire (see Appendix 3).

¹⁴⁰ See Ch. 4.

5. Community newspapers and websites

The British Jewish community has four newspapers, all weeklies: the *Jewish Chronicle*, founded in London in 1841 and covering the entire community; the *Jewish Telegraph*, founded in Manchester in 1950, which is cross-communal and focuses on Jewish communities outside London; and two *haredi* newspapers, the London-based *Jewish Tribune*, founded in 1962, and the British edition of *Hamodia*, whose parent organization produces a daily newspaper of the same name in Israel. I focused on the *Jewish Chronicle* and the *Jewish Tribune*, since these are most relevant to the London community.

Community newspapers provided a rich source of information about women's activities, roles, and struggles in the community; the foundation of and controversy over Stanmore Women's Tefillah Group, for instance, was amply documented in the *Jewish Chronicle* for 1992 and 1993, with heated discussion occupying many of the readers' letters for this period.¹⁴¹ Articles and letters discussing the two major reports on Jewish women in Britain (the Preston Report of 1994 and the follow-up Women's Review of 2009) and descriptions of and reactions to women's religious activities provided insight into a wide range of community attitudes. In contrast to the *Jewish Chronicle*, which reports events across the denominational spectrum, the *Jewish Tribune* caters to the *haredi* community, though it is read more widely, and reflects the attitudes to women's roles of this sector of the British Jewish community. Photographs of women never appear, as this would be considered immodest, and women are generally mentioned only in contexts of philanthropy and education. Analysis of their portrayal in articles, letters, and the 'Women's Page' provided material embodying the 'official' or public ideal of Jewish women in this part of the Jewish community; advertisements and local news sections provided details of *haredi* women's religious events and activities.

Each of these five paths enriched the data and impressions that I acquired, and each of them constantly influenced and contributed to the other methods employed. I used each of the 'narrower' methods (interviews, questionnaires, email list monitoring, and newspaper survey) as and when seemed appropriate; they threaded their way

¹⁴¹ See Ch. 4.

through the constant backdrop of my participant observation within the Jewish community of north-west London, inextricably uniting 'life' and 'work'.

Chapter 3: Women's life in the community 1: 'official' activities

'When I was *very* little, I used to *love* sitting with my Dad, it was always preferable to sit downstairs with Dad in the main synagogue than be upstairs, and once you get to a certain age you can't do that anymore, and I really felt I was missing out. But I didn't know what I was missing out on, because it was just not in the spectrum of conversation.' Bernice Susser, interview.

* * *

Orthodox women participate in the formal religious life of the community, albeit in the generally auxiliary role of an (optional) audience for the men at synagogue services, although many pray along quietly with the men. In contrast, they often play important roles in the management of synagogues and community welfare organizations that embody central religious values such as *hesed* (kindness, concern for others' welfare). In this chapter I will document and analyse women's activity in and experience of formal public worship in the synagogue; occasions of particular tension for women in lifecycle celebrations and the festival of Simhat Torah; and the changing nature of women's leadership roles in the synagogue. Space limitations preclude consideration of women's Jewish education and their role in Jewish welfare organizations, although both are important factors in religious life.

Women and the synagogue

The central function of the synagogue is communal prayer. Three formal services every day, with additional services on sabbaths, new moon (*rosh hodesh*), and festivals, are obligatory for men; women's obligation in formal prayer is less clear, and most Orthodox women assume they are exempt, at least to some degree.¹ In addition, men's formal prayer is ideally performed with a *minyan* of ten adult men, encouraging their presence at synagogue. Ritual Torah reading—a community obligation generally considered non-obligatory for women—also takes place in the synagogue, as does the reading of the Megillah on Purim (which women are obliged to hear). The synagogue is thus central to the performance of (male) religious obligations, but much less so to the performance of women's religious duties.

¹ See Weiss, *Women at Prayer*, chs. 2 and 4 for discussion of women's halakhic obligation in prayer.

However, the synagogue has two additional and crucial communal functions for both men and women. As indicated by its Hebrew name, *beit keneset* ('house of assembly'), modern synagogues are the locus for various activities including formal and informal study, recreation, social gatherings, and lifecycle celebrations. Moreover, the synagogue embodies the community—a vital factor for women who attend sabbath and festival services regularly, particularly United Synagogue women (though many United Synagogue members attend rarely or only on the High Holidays). Women often use the words '*shul*' (synagogue) and 'community' interchangeably, and express deep attachment to their own synagogue.² Flora Rendberg's synagogue is central to her identity:

My [relatives] in America attend a Conservative synagogue and I've felt absolutely at home in that environment but would not leave my own synagogue, maybe because it's my other family—I've been going there for over 50 years [...] I've never found a[nother] synagogue where I feel when I go in that I belong [...]

As noted in Chapter 2, a 2010 survey estimated that 54.7% of all British Jewish households affiliated to a synagogue belonged to 'Central Orthodox' synagogues, with 10.9% belonging to 'Strictly Orthodox' synagogues.³ Many nominally Orthodox Jews primarily belong to a synagogue to obtain burial rights (included in synagogue membership), and secondarily to reserve a seat for the High Holidays, when attendance increases exponentially. Otherwise, many attend synagogue rarely, and are often colloquially described as 'three times a year Jews'.⁴ Synagogue attendance constitutes a major internal marker of level of observance: Belinda Cohen, a United Synagogue member, when asked to describe her Jewish upbringing, started by saying 'As far as Jewish life's concerned, we always went to *shul*', and her daughter Beatrice Levi, describing her own somewhat lower level of observance, pointed out in mitigation that 'we do regularly attend synagogue'.

² See Ch. 2.

³ 73% of Jewish households are affiliated to a synagogue; Graham and Vulkan, *Synagogue Membership in the United Kingdom in 2010*, 9. For this figure, a 'narrow' definition of 'household' was used (head of household was Jewish); if a broader definition is used (at least one household member is Jewish), the percentage of synagogue-affiliated Jewish households drops to 59%.

⁴ Or 'twice a year Jews', referring either to the two festivals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or to the three days these involve.

North-west London, the most densely populated Jewish area, boasts a high number of synagogues of all sizes and shades of Orthodoxy; an online directory lists 56 sabbath morning services in Hendon and Golders Green alone, in about 50 synagogues.⁵ These include five United Synagogue (or affiliated) congregations, eight Sefardi services, and 17 hasidic institutions. The larger synagogues generally offer an early service (*hashkamah*) and a later, more leisurely one; they also offer youth and children's services. Other parts of London (except for Stamford Hill) provide a smaller range.

1. (Not) being there

Attendance

Many observant women rarely attend synagogue, even if their fathers, husbands, and sons go every week. This seems to have been the norm for most Jewish women at least until the 1970s;⁶ some hasidic women still do not attend synagogue, or only rarely.⁷ From informal conversations with acquaintances,⁸ it appears that most women and men in their 50s remember their mothers never going to synagogue, or only attending on the High Holidays. One woman in her 30s noted that, in her childhood, 'women didn't go to Hagers', a hasidic synagogue in Golders Green. The most common reason was that their mothers 'came from the background whereby Jewish women weren't obliged to attend services', though lack of knowledge of Hebrew, lack of interest, and distance from the synagogue were also cited. For the minority whose mothers did go more often, bad weather or 'a surfeit of guests' might prevent them. Women's attendance was (and still is) seen as optional, while that of men is compulsory: 'Orthodox synagogue attendance remains very much a men's thing.'⁹

⁵ 'Frum London' website, <<http://www.frumlondon.co.uk/DaveningSchedule.asp>> (accessed 13 May 2013).

⁶ In contrast, Cairo Genizah evidence suggests that mediaeval women in Egypt attended synagogue regularly, and Ashkenazi rabbinic literature from the 13th century onwards documents women's galleries or prayer rooms, women's prayers, and women prayer leaders, as well as regular attendance by women; see Reguer, 'Women and the Synagogue' and Taitz, 'Women's Voices'.

⁷ Two hasidic women explained their lack of knowledge about synagogue customs associated with Yom Kippur by noting that they 'never' went to synagogue. Phone conversations with Hannah Zeved and Shira Lemberg, July 2013.

⁸ June 2013.

⁹ Sztokman, *The Men's Section*, 12.

Furthermore, those women who would have attended synagogue more regularly were prevented from going while their children were young by a religious factor: the absence of an *eruv*.¹⁰ A woman in her 50s noted that ‘when my siblings and I were small Mum didn’t go as there was no *eruv* and pushing a buggy was not an option as we were observant. After my sister could walk that far she would go as well. After we grew up she was always in *shul* on Shabat mornings.’¹¹

In February 2003, after years of opposition from both Jews and non-Jews, North-west London acquired its first *eruv*, revolutionizing many women’s experience of the sabbath and synagogue and enabling large numbers of younger women to attend.¹² Before this, observant women with babies or small children could not attend synagogue on the sabbath and Yom Kippur, although they could on other festivals when carrying in public areas is permitted. Many women with large families did not attend sabbath services for years, which may help explain many older women’s difficulties in following the service. Disabled women and men were also affected, since they could not use wheelchairs. In 1994, the Preston Report singled out the absence of an *eruv* as ‘essentially an Orthodox women’s issue’, and reported ‘a firm belief that the Eruv represents a lifeline to young families, single parents, the disabled and the elderly’.¹³

In spite of dire warnings of the creation of ghettos and the potential hostility of the non-Jewish population, the *eruv* has proved such a success that three additional *eruvim* have been constructed in London (there are plans for several more) and one in Manchester.¹⁴ Not all rabbis accept the validity of the *eruv*, however; several *haredi* rabbis object to it and forbid their followers to use it, with the result that many *haredi* women with young families are still unable to attend synagogue on the sabbath, as well as some Sefardi women, since not all Sefardim accept the London *eruv* as kosher.¹⁵ However, the *eruv*’s introduction has been the single most important factor in enabling women’s synagogue attendance.

¹⁰ See Ch. 2, n. 110.

¹¹ Email from a Modern Orthodox woman, 11 April 2013.

¹² See Watson, ‘Symbolic Spaces’ for analysis of the opposition, and the *eruv*’s importance for women (p. 508).

¹³ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 36.

¹⁴ See Rocker, ‘How the Eruv Liberated Families’ and Cousineau, ‘Domestication’.

¹⁵ Personal communication, Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum, 12 July 2013.

Even if an *eruv* is in place, women may decide not to attend synagogue if their children are very small, or unwell; since men have a greater halakhic obligation to attend synagogue, it is the mother who usually stays home. However, some large synagogues have early morning (*hashkamah*) services, partly designed to allow men to attend and then return home to enable their wives to go to the main service.

On sabbath mornings, much the same pattern of women’s attendance can be observed across the spectrum of Orthodox synagogues. A few women arrive early, but most turn up during the Torah reading, with some latecomers arriving just in time for the end of the service, and, of course, for *kidush*, the social gathering after the service, when the blessing over wine is made, usually accompanied by an array of snacks. Sheyna Marcus, a devout woman in her 20s, observed, ‘The more religious the *shul* the later the women come [...] there is a feeling “I don’t have a *hiyuv* [obligation] to be in *shul* and therefore I can come very late.’”¹⁶ In the large United synagogues, at the beginning of the service (8-9 a.m.) there are typically two dozen men and perhaps two or three women. Visits to six synagogues in spring-autumn 2013 yielded the following data:

Table 3.1: Women’s synagogue attendance on sabbath morning (2013)¹⁷

Synagogue and type of women’s area	Before Shema	Start of Torah reading	End of Torah reading	End of service	Estimated number of men
Hampstead Garden Suburb United Synagogue ¹⁸ (Norrice Lea): Gallery ¹⁹	c.30	c.50	c.60 incl. 10 unmarried	c.70	100-150
					(continued)

¹⁶ For her personal practice of arriving promptly, modified by concepts of modesty, see Ch. 5.

¹⁷ Numbers at Hendon United were particularly high the week I visited because the sermon was given by the Chief Rabbi elect, attracting people who might have gone to other synagogues or not gone to synagogue at all. Numbers of men are estimated here.

¹⁸ To get some idea of the percentage of women members who attend, it should be noted that the synagogue’s website puts membership at 1,200 households; <<http://www.hgss.org.uk/home/communityprofile.shtml>> (accessed 13 May 2013), with more female than male members for the last 18 years.

¹⁹ For different types of *mehitsah*, see below.

Synagogue and type of women's area	Before Shema	Start of Torah reading	End of Torah reading	End of service	Estimated number of men
Hendon United Synagogue (Raleigh Close): Gallery	13	14	65 incl. 5 unmarried	100	c.50 at beginning, over 100 by end
Hendon Adas (UOHC): Gallery + screen	11	17	27 incl. 4? unmarried	25	c.40-50
Heikhhal Leah (Sefardi): Area walled off with windows & net curtains	1	2	7 + a few small girls	11 + about 10 small children	c.70-80
Alei Tzion (affiliated to US): Head-high net curtain on one side of room	7, all unmarried	19 incl. 14 unmarried	30 incl. 18 unmarried	47 incl. 31 unmarried	c.70
North Hendon Adas (ex-UOHC, <i>haredi</i>): Gallery + screen	4 incl. 1 unmarried	8 incl. 2 unmarried	30 incl. 9 unmarried	25 incl. 8 unmarried	30-40?

The only synagogue I visited where unmarried women outnumbered married women was Alei Tzion, an independently founded synagogue now affiliated to the United Synagogue, which was set up in 2004 as a young, strongly Zionist, and more observant Modern Orthodox community. Most women there were young, ranging from late teens to 30-year-olds (see table above). There is a high number of very young children, and many married women remained outside the synagogue, either accompanying their children to one of the two age-based children's services, or supervising their play. In this case, the very fact that the synagogue is a self-selecting community based on age and outlook differentiates it from both United Synagogue and *haredi* patterns of women's attendance.²⁰

Even when attending, women find it hard to juggle children and synagogue prayer. Young mothers often accompany their children to children's services rather than

²⁰ The differences between Alei Tzion, patronized by younger, more observant women, and the United synagogues attended by their traditionalist mothers reflect the contrast between 'text-based' and 'mimetic' communities analysed in Soloveitchik, 'Rupture and Reconstruction'.

participating in a standard service themselves; though many fathers organize and participate in children's services, others feel obliged to attend the main service, leaving childcare to their wives. Shirley Daniels, a young, university-educated mother of five, married to a Sefardi rabbi, described her current synagogue experience:

Nowadays it's nothing, because the twins are 1 and we're coming up to starting being able to take them to *shul*, to participate in the children's service. So at the moment it's nothing other than a *kidush* and a celebration of other people's *simhas* [lifecycle celebrations] [...] there's definitely no service, so it's social and communal [...] on the occasion that I get to *davn musaf* [pray the additional service], because [my husband]'s gone to a *hashkamah* service, and then will take over with the children, I find myself desperate to try and pack it all in, and it's impossible to do.

Mothers who attend the main service may go in and out in response to children's needs; though most synagogues tolerate children moving around and playing, other women may glare at women with crying or noisy children or request them to remove their child. Women often leave before the end of the service, particularly if they want to prepare for lunch guests, or if they are involved in setting out the communal *kidush*.

As a partial consequence of mothers' involvement in children's services and general childcare, most women who attend services are older, particularly in United synagogues, where most are in their 60s or above. The few younger women are often unmarried, and there is a scattering of girls, several only there briefly, 'visiting' their mothers.²¹ Teenage girls attend youth services in smaller numbers than boys, and in United synagogues, often congregate in groups in quiet corners of the building, such as the ladies' toilets, getting on with their social life.

Attempts have been made at some synagogues to attract girls to some form of religious participation, often a discussion group; thus twice a month Barnet Synagogue offers "'Girls Talk", a youth service just for the young ladies'.²² At Finchley United Synagogue (Kinloss), there is a 'Chat in a Flat' group for the girls

²¹ See the table above.

²² Barnet Synagogue website, <<http://www.barnetsynagogue.org.uk/youth.html>> (accessed 31 July 2013).

during the Torah reading; ‘Chat’ stands for ‘Come Hear A Thought’, and the aim is to hold a discussion on the weekly Torah portion, but apparently ‘chat’ in the usual sense predominates. The youth director plans to phase the group out, as he ‘wants the girls to pray’, and two post-seminary girls have been hired to encourage them. However, there is little for the girls to do in the youth service, which serves primarily as a training and socializing group for the boys. Girls may read the prayer for the Queen and the prayer for the state of Israel,²³ and in 2013 a new slot was created, after the formal end of the service, during which a girl gives a *devar torah*. However, few girls are interested in praying, apart from a ‘few sixth-form girls who sit at the back of the youth service and pray’; most come ‘to see their friends and for the *kidush*’. Girls who would be more interested in getting involved if given the chance stay away from synagogue altogether, as there is next to nothing for them to do and little prospect of change.²⁴

One pattern which appears unchanged for several decades is that very few women—traditionalist, Modern Orthodox, or *haredi*—go to Friday night or festival eve services, afternoon sabbath services,²⁵ or weekday morning or evening services. The few women who do attend on Friday night are usually unmarried, often teenage girls (some possibly escaping the last-minute pre-sabbath rush at home). Some unmarried women see their presence at Friday night services as a marker of their single state, like Sheyna Marcus:

I’ve gone to *shul* on Friday night from quite a young age, so I’m not used to being at home when my mum lights candles, which in some ways is weird, because one day, hopefully, I will be at home lighting the candles, and it will be almost not like *shabes* [sabbath] for me because I’m so used to, first thing, go to *shul* on Friday night.

The influence of synagogue layout on women’s experience

In all Orthodox synagogues men and women sit separately,²⁶ but arrangements for this differ widely between synagogues and play a major role in women’s experience

²³ The first (and sometimes the second) is read in English, so lacks the cachet of ‘serious prayer’.

²⁴ Information on Kinloss from a phone conversation with a (male) teenage family friend, 11 Sept. 2013.

²⁵ Only two other women were present at the sabbath afternoon service I attended at Hampstead Garden Suburb United Synagogue on 18 May 2013, with about 40-50 men.

²⁶ See Rothschild, ‘Undermining’.

of communal prayer. Most large United synagogues have high, raked ‘ladies’ galleries’ around three sides of the synagogue sanctuary, occasionally with a pierced screen from waist to head level above the parapet, though a few modern buildings have galleries of this type around the walls at ground level. Some synagogues have ‘mini-*mehitsahs*’ to enable older or less mobile women to sit at the back of the main hall, behind the men, though many of these women dislike ‘sitting with the men’ and will struggle upstairs anyway.

Haredi synagogues always have a screen above the gallery parapet, usually a wooden lattice or a metal grille; at the hasidic Hagers synagogue in Golders Green, the gallery parapet is topped with a thick, non-transparent curtain held by rods at top and bottom, which reaches above head height, blocking all sight of the men (though women occasionally push the curtain edge back to get a brief glimpse). Many women, particularly in the *haredi* community, accept and internalize the standard explanation for separation of the sexes during prayer—that men will be distracted by the sight of women—and experience unease and shame if they pray where men can see them, though it is rare for men to express discomfort about arrangements for separate seating, even if they are makeshift.

Women are often unaware, or unconvinced, that there is no halakhic need for a *mehitsah* at all in a temporary place of prayer. For example, at an Orthodox service held at the Limmud conference, where the *mehitsah* was a chest-high net curtain, a young woman in her early 20s—who was moving from a traditionalist Orthodox background towards a more *haredi* outlook—attempted to pray behind a pillar, and, having subsequently complained about the lack of a ‘proper’ *mehitsah*, attended no more services. None of the (mostly traditionalist Orthodox) men appeared to have any concerns about the *mehitsah*, and one even ‘invaded’ the women’s side, looking for a book, much to the women’s indignation.

Although the *mehitsah* is ostensibly there to ‘protect’ the men from seeing women, it is often women who express discomfort with inadequate or missing *mehitsot*. They may not subscribe to all the stringencies of *tseni’ut*, ‘modesty’, prescribed by *haredi* rabbis, but the sense that they should remain invisible to men in synagogue is deeply

ingrained, especially in women from the traditionalist and *haredi* sectors.²⁷ Even Modern Orthodox women who identify as feminists enjoy having a ‘women’s space’, and there has been little to no agitation within Orthodoxy to remove the *mehitsah* altogether, as opposed to making it less of an exclusionary feature.²⁸

Alternative services, often held in smaller rooms within the synagogue complex, usually have a temporary curtain made of net fabric of varying degrees of transparency, about two metres high, with the men in front of the curtain and the women behind it, at the back of the room. At Hendon United Synagogue, before the alternative service moved location, the *mehitsah* ran down the middle, with men and women side by side, an arrangement that the women found preferable.

A Hendon Sefardi synagogue women’s section is separated by a wall with windows (open during services) covered with net curtains which are opened so that women can kiss the Torah scrolls as they are taken out (a practice that is controversial and often architecturally impossible in Ashkenazi synagogues). However, the ‘invisible’ and auxiliary nature of women’s attendance and women’s space was underlined by two men who walked into the women’s section 30 minutes before the end of the service to set up trestle tables for the *kidush*; they bustled about a couple of yards away from the praying women, with no attempt to minimize noise. At the *kidush* it became clear that seats at these tables were only for men; the women stood at a small table in the corridor outside the women’s section, now occupied solely by men.

In *haredi* synagogues without galleries the curtain or wooden divider is often opaque, and continues to well above head height, so that women cannot see into the men’s section—or they may be in a different room:

A friend of mine who’s a lot more *haredi*, her father *davns* in Etz Hayim Yeshiva, and the women are upstairs in a different room and the men are downstairs, and this little hole in the floor that women could peer down if you would like to see what’s going on, and she said that her father stopped going to the *shul* for a while and went to Hendon Adas because he was

²⁷ For *tzeni’ut*, see Ch. 5.

²⁸ The political significance of the *mehitsah* as an Orthodox marker and one of the significant differences between Orthodox synagogues and those to the left of Orthodoxy has also tended to rule out opposition to the presence, as opposed to the type, of *mehitsah*.

actually shocked to find that his daughter didn't know that the *sefer torah* was being held up at *vezot hatorah*.²⁹

The height and degree of transparency of the *mehitsah* are often the focus of intense disagreement, sometimes between congregants and rabbis, and sometimes between congregants themselves. The 1994 Preston Report highlighted many women's dissatisfaction: 'A restricted view often accompanied by worse acoustics has led many respondents in ladies' galleries throughout the country to feel estranged from the service [...] Young women commented that sitting "on the margins" they could not help but feel literally marginalized.'³⁰

Synagogues with galleries accentuate the women's 'spectator' role. Apart from joining in communally sung prayers, or silently following the prayers and listening to the Torah reading, women have no roles in the service. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women sang in United Synagogue choirs, but increasing rabbinic opposition led to their exclusion.³¹ Men tend to sing loudly in synagogue, and United Synagogue women join in the sung prayers, though too enthusiastic a contribution will earn a visitor disapproving looks. The women in Hagers do not sing at all but whisper the liturgical songs, even though the uninhibited and noisy singing of the men below makes it impossible for them to be heard. While in most synagogues, particularly *haredi* ones, many men *shokl* (rock back and forth) enthusiastically while praying, few, if any, women *shokl* in either United or *haredi* synagogues; a subdued, gentle swaying is occasionally seen, especially among younger women.

The ladies' gallery is not necessarily regarded as a place of prayer. At a sabbath morning service in Hendon United Synagogue, I counted 14 'chat groups', made up of between two and four women, during the Torah reading, when about 65 women were present. They kept up a steady conversation, with breaks to greet newcomers, or to join other groups. One pair of women stood in the entrance aisle and talked for half an hour. The talking almost stops for the Prayer for the Royal Family (recited in

²⁹ Sheyna Marcus, interview. Note the father decided which synagogue his daughter would attend. *Ve-zot hatorah*, 'and this is the Torah' is sung when the uncovered Torah scroll is raised after the Torah reading.

³⁰ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 34-5.

³¹ In 1892 Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler refused to allow a mixed choir at the foundation stone ceremony of Hampstead United Synagogue. See Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 108.

English in United synagogues), the Prayer for the State of Israel, the sermon (in English), and the *amidah* (the silent prayer of 18 benedictions, recited twice on sabbath and festival mornings). In contrast, women at the *haredi* Hendon Adas Yisroel tended to sit by themselves or in family groups and follow the service, and the only talking was by two elderly women who only indulged themselves between *aliyot* during the Torah reading;³² however, the men were less restrained, and there were several rounds of ‘shushing’ downstairs.

In all synagogues, women who want to pray tend to sit by themselves, following in the prayerbook or *humash*.³³ Those who only attend High Holiday services and lifecycle events such as bar-mitzvahs often do not even bother to take a prayerbook or *humash* off the shelf, and talk throughout the service, often to the annoyance of more devout neighbours. Again Alei Tzion was unusual: very few women talked and there was an atmosphere of concentration on prayer, with every woman following the service and singing along quietly.

Women’s experience of synagogue

Women have mixed feelings about their experience in synagogue. Some find it essential to their experience of the sabbath, like Kate Moskovitz, a *haredi* mother of eight, who replicated synagogue services at home when her children were small:

Shabbes [sabbath] to me is going to *shul shabbes* morning, and coming back from *shul* [...] when I couldn’t go to *shul* because of the youngsters, I made a *shul* in the house, we all *davned* in the house, and we had a children’s service when they were tiny.

Katherine Marks, a Jewish educator and mother of four, felt strongly enough about the local synagogues when she lived in a provincial town to set up her family’s own services: ‘*Shul* was terrible, so we started our own *shul*, which was run from our house in a college round the corner.’ Like many others, she had happy memories of sitting in the men’s section when young, only to be banished to the gallery as she

³² The sabbath morning Torah reading is divided into seven *aliyot* (lit. ‘ascents’), with a man being called up to recite blessings before and after each *aliyah*.

³³ A *humash* is an edition of the Torah designed for use in synagogue; the text is divided into the weekly portions (*parshayot*), accompanied by the weekly readings from the prophetic books (*haftarot*).

matured: ‘When I was a little girl I remember sitting downstairs, and I *loved* that, just being part of that, and then of course when I got too big I had to go upstairs, and I didn’t like that very much, but accepted it.’

In her teens, communal prayer during the summer school run by the Jewish Youth Study Group had left an indelible, enchanted memory of a deeply moving and spiritual experience:

On Friday, it was a ritual, we would all walk down to the beautiful *shul* by the river, and it was just the most incredibly spiritual experience to see. We’d all been scruffy and filthy all week, and the boys in suits and the girls in their long dresses—we’d all walk to *shul*, and it was very singy, and I *loved* the singing, and our boys were leading it, and there were enough there that had good voices, and that’s where I learnt all the tunes, and we would sing for hours on Friday night. It was just amazing.

In contrast, her usual synagogue was ‘meaningless’:

I did feel that it was all slow and long and boring, and I quite liked the singing, but I never knew what was going on, I was never able to follow the *leyening* [Torah reading] even though I could read Hebrew *very* well and could translate, most of it, it never *occurred* to me to follow the *leyening*, because I couldn’t really hear it, and it was so far away.

But memories of unusually spiritual moments during communal prayer are often accompanied by bitterness, resentment, and a sense that something is lacking. Some women are painfully aware of a mixed response, like Shirley Daniels:

I never really felt comfortable *davning* [praying] at home, because I was brought up in a *davning-at-shul* family, you know there are other families where the women always *davned* at home and so it feels very natural, but I was brought up with *davning at shul*, and sitting next to my mum in *shul* always ... but *shul* experience is so much bigger than the service of the *tefilah* [prayer], it’s communal life ... [there is] resentment connected to *shul* because [my husband] goes to it so much ... so decided by men for men, to take them away from out the house, and away from the children, and why are those my duties and not his duties or our duties—yeah, there’s lots of conflicting emotions about it.

For Sharon Jastrow, an older woman brought up in a semi-observant Orthodox family, whose ‘religious direction had changed’ when she married a non-observant

man, her move to the Masorti movement was partly fuelled by intense dislike of the United Synagogue experience: ‘I know I could never ever go to *shul* there, they are not interested in the fact that everybody talks, and nobody listens during *kadish*, and that the sermons are superficial junk [...] It doesn’t bother them, there’s a kind of separation between their intellectual and Jewish needs and *shul*.’

The Preston Report devoted three pages to ‘Women in the Synagogue’ in 1994, and many of the issues and complaints recorded were still being raised in the follow-up Women’s Review of 2009.³⁴ The same issues were raised by the United Synagogue women I talked to: the feeling that the rabbi’s sermon was directed largely to the men; the loneliness and exclusion of single, divorced, or widowed women; the fact that ‘in many mainstream Orthodox synagogues, catering continues to be the sum total of women’s participation in synagogue life’;³⁵ and overall, ‘the general disappointment of the dreariness and the boringness and the alienating experience of the United Synagogue’.³⁶ Many women, in particular the elderly, do not have sufficient knowledge of Hebrew to be able to follow the service, much less join in the prayers. It is not uncommon to hear women dismiss the synagogue as ‘just a boy’s club’, or claim they are glad that they do not have to attend services.

In contrast, *haredi* women express far fewer criticisms and complaints about their synagogue experience; often, they have a better Jewish education—enabling them to follow and recite the prayers—and they have accepted and internalized *haredi* expectations of women’s roles. Sheyna Marcus, who described herself as being on the borderline between Modern Orthodox and *haredi*, valued the sincerity she sensed in her Edgware synagogue:

It’s not superficial, the rabbi there is not scared to say what he thinks or be blunt about what people should be doing, and you know whereas if you got up in the United Synagogue *shul* and you said, ‘Oh, you have to stop talking in *shul*’, or ‘You have to cover your elbows when you come into shul’, the community would get into an uproar, ‘How could he say that in a pulpit’—no, the rabbi will quite happily get up and say ‘You’re not singing loud

³⁴ Preston *et al.*, *Connection, Continuity and Community*, 12.

³⁵ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 31.

³⁶ Katherine Marks, interview. These feelings are not limited to United Synagogue women; one of the hasidic women who told me she never went to synagogue (see above, n. 7) said this was because it was ‘boring’.

enough, I want to hear you’, and people respect him for that and the *shul* has become very close and real rather than superficial. So that’s why I *davn* there during the year. But on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and other times I prefer to be in a traditional United Synagogue.

It is notable that, even though she appreciated the ‘real’ spiritual quality of her current synagogue, Sheyna preferred the less spiritual but deeply traditional United Synagogue in which she had been brought up for the most intense and significant festivals of the year; atmosphere and a sense of continuity are as important for many women as personal spiritual satisfaction. Women usually attend the synagogues to which their families belong, but frequently visit others for lifecycle events, such as bar and bat mitzvahs. However, they are unlikely to experiment with other denominations’ synagogues, even if they are very unhappy with their own, as this potentially carries a high social cost, perhaps in difficulties for their children in finding marriage partners, or being asked to leave *haredi* schools.³⁷ One young mother with an excellent Jewish education and strongly-held feminist principles who attends a *haredi* synagogue in Edgware is so alienated by her experience on Simhat Torah (see below) that she longs to try the local Masorti synagogue, but is aware that ‘somebody is bound to see me going in’, and another, more conventional Sefardi mother in her 30s noted that because her daughter attends the *haredi* Beis Ya’akov school, she has to be very careful about which synagogues she goes to, or there will be problems with the school.

2. Flashpoints: tension in the synagogue

Although many Orthodox Jewish women are either content with, or resigned to, their synagogue experience, the tension between their assigned role as spectators and their desire to participate—or at least be acknowledged—sometimes reaches critical levels. Most of these occasions mark lifecycle events: birth; bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs; and the two key rituals that mark death—the recitation of *kadish*, the mourner’s prayer, at set points in every service,³⁸ and the commemoration of a

³⁷ Both possibilities were often cited by women as social sanctions for failure to observe communal rules and expectations; nobody ever mentioned an actual example. It seems likely that such sanctions could only be applied in the *haredi* community.

³⁸ For a brief, harrowing account of an American Orthodox woman’s difficulties in saying *kadish*, see Reguer, ‘Kaddish’; for contrasting experiences, see Millen, ‘Female Voice’, 181.

yortsayt, the anniversary of a relative's death.³⁹ The other occasion on which such tension is palpable is the festival of Simhat Torah, the 'Rejoicing of the Law', on which men dance with the Torah scrolls, and every man is honoured with an *aliyah* to the Torah.

Women's role in lifecycle events

Women traditionally play no or very little role in synagogue lifecycle celebrations, apart from watching, as demonstrated by the following overview.

- Circumcision (*berit milah*), during which a boy is also named, is usually performed at home or in a hall; the mother usually sits in a different room and has no role.⁴⁰
- A girl is usually named as part of the blessing following her father's *aliyah* in the synagogue on the sabbath following the birth; usually, especially if there is no *eruv*, the mother and baby are not present in synagogue for the naming.⁴¹
- On the sabbath before a wedding, an Ashkenazi groom is given an *aliyah*,⁴² and wedding songs are often sung after he completes the blessings; the bride-to-be may watch,⁴³ but has no parallel ceremony.⁴⁴
- Weddings are frequently celebrated in synagogues, though this is not mandatory. During the ceremony, unlike the groom, the bride says nothing, and her only active role is the custom of walking around the groom seven times under the wedding canopy, before the ceremony begins.
- At bar mitzvahs, the mother has no role to play, beyond watching from the gallery or the women's section.

³⁹ A *yortsayt* is marked publicly by the recitation of a memorial prayer during the Torah reading, usually after a (male) relation has had an *aliyah* to the Torah.

⁴⁰ In Modern Orthodox circles, the mother may give a short Torah talk or explain the choice of the baby's name after the end of the actual ceremony.

⁴¹ See Ch. 4 for *simhat bat* ceremonies.

⁴² The custom is known as an *oyfruf* (Yiddish: 'call up').

⁴³ Some Ashkenazim follow the practice of the bride and groom not seeing each other for the week preceding the wedding, in which case the bride-to-be will attend a different synagogue.

⁴⁴ A semi-parallel event, the *shabat kalah* ('bride's sabbath') has developed in recent years, in parallel to the increasingly popular non-Jewish 'hen party', but is celebrated at home rather than in synagogue, and so far seems to be celebrated by younger, more observant women—the 'post-sem' generation—from the *haredi* and Modern Orthodox sectors, rather than by traditionalist women.

- A girl's bat mitzvah was not celebrated in synagogue until a couple of decades ago, but more recently group (*bat hayil*) and individual bat mitzvah ceremonies have been introduced into United synagogues, though usually not in the context of sabbath communal prayer (see below).
- The recitation of *kadish* by women mourners is regarded in *haredi* and some traditionalist circles as an undesirable innovation.⁴⁵
- Since women do not receive *aliyot* to the Torah, they cannot do this to mark the *yortsayt* of relatives.

However, change can be observed in some of these areas, particularly in United synagogues, sometimes as a result of women's desire for greater participation in public ritual. In order to elucidate the ways in which women negotiate and experience change in public communal rituals I shall examine three of these rituals—baby blessings, bat mitzvah, and the recitation of *kadish* and marking of *yortsayt*—and consider their implications for women's agency and experience.

A. Baby blessings

Several United synagogues have recently introduced 'baby blessing' ceremonies (they have not spread to *haredi* synagogues). In the 1990s, Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen of Stanmore United Synagogue designed a brief ceremony, in which he read psalms and recited the priestly benediction over the babies at the end of the morning service on the second day of a festival, chosen to avoid the prohibition of carrying the baby to synagogue on the sabbath in the absence of an *eruv*.⁴⁶

Other United synagogues followed suit. An early example was Woodside Park, where the ceremony was introduced at Passover in 2004,⁴⁷ despite initially strong opposition from the rabbi, who did not want women or babies on the *bimah*,⁴⁸ and was concerned that women might not dress modestly. The ceremony, held on the second days of Passover and Sukkot each year, takes place just before *adon olam*, the

⁴⁵ Historically, women have recited *kadish*, both for parents and spouses, at least as far back as 17th-century Amsterdam; very few British Jewish women are aware of this. See Millen, 'Female Voice'.

⁴⁶ Rabbi Cohen was unable to remember why he had introduced this innovation.

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Dr Hayden Kendler, 24 July 2013.

⁴⁸ The central podium from which prayers are led and on which the Torah is read. The rabbi had also objected to under-bat mitzvah age girls coming up to the podium for the *kol hane'arim* blessing given to children on Simhat Torah. The current, younger, rabbi supports the baby blessings enthusiastically.

concluding hymn. The families assemble in front of the wardens' box, the babies' names are read out, and the parents carry them on to the *bimah*. The mothers hold the babies while the fathers place their hands on the babies' heads and recite the Friday night blessing for children.⁴⁹ The rabbi says a few words, and each baby is presented with a certificate, a teddy bear, and a Jewish children's book.

The lack of a speaking role for women is explained by the fact that the ceremony was largely introduced as a way of bringing in new, young families to the community, rather than enabling greater involvement of women.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, other synagogues have adapted the basic baby blessing ceremony to give women a more prominent role. Radlett United Synagogue, under the influence of a young rabbi and his wife,⁵¹ has recently introduced a very popular baby blessing ceremony, that includes psalms and prayers read by the mother, father, and grandparents.⁵² A biblical text used to bless children is sung,⁵³ and the ceremony closes with the mothers holding the babies under a *talit* (prayer shawl) held aloft by all the fathers, while the rabbi reads the priestly blessing. In order to avoid desecration of a festival by non-observant relatives driving to synagogue, the ceremony takes place on a Sunday, and is combined with a tea for all the families; this also means that photographs can be taken, which would be prohibited on festivals. Radlett is a young congregation in both senses: it was founded in 1981, and is one of the fastest-growing United synagogues, with many young families. The *rebetsn* is employed alongside her husband (in older synagogues the *rebetsn* was expected to work for free if she got involved in synagogue affairs), and is a major factor in the promotion of baby blessings.⁵⁴ Similarly, a young rabbi appointed to Muswell Hill United Synagogue in September 2008 held a Sunday 'round-up' baby blessing plus lunch in

⁴⁹ This consists of a short introduction—'May God bless you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah' for girls, and 'May God bless you like Ephraim and Menasseh' for boys, followed by the priestly blessing (Num. 6: 24-6). See *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, 310-11.

⁵⁰ Dr Kendler made this point explicitly.

⁵¹ He arrived in 2011, replacing an older and more conservative rabbi.

⁵² These are read in English. Information about the Radlett baby blessings comes from telephone interviews with Rabbi Leo Dee and Rebetsn Lucy Dee, 24 July 2013.

⁵³ *Hamalakh hago'el oti* (Gen. 48: 16); see *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, 248-9.

⁵⁴ She set up a mothers and toddlers group that forms the basic network for recruiting families to take part in baby blessings, noting that 'if the *rebetsn* is not engaged, the rabbi may not be aware of or have the necessary links with the mums' to get them to attend.

June 2011 for all children born since his arrival, which was very popular, and plans to hold more in future.⁵⁵

Not every change that enables women to play a more participatory role in public rituals is inspired by a desire to empower women. The introduction of baby blessings is a case in point; rather than being designed to give women a role in birth rituals, they seem to have been developed and promoted by rabbis and (male) lay leaders as a way of attracting young, unaffiliated families into synagogues, with a view to encouraging their attendance or consumption of synagogue-based commercial services such as nurseries. Significantly, no rabbis reported any input or suggestions for the ceremony from the participating parents, though all remarked that the ceremony had proved very popular. No objections to the ceremony, for instance on the grounds of its novelty and lack of any halakhic basis, were raised.⁵⁶ Parents with more radical views on the involvement and active participation of women tend to compose their own version of *simhat bat* or *zeved bat* ceremonies for daughters,⁵⁷ held at home or in rented halls, and often make creative use of biblical and midrashic texts. The social aspects of the baby blessing ceremony, rather than more narrowly defined religious values, are paramount.

B. Bat mitzvah

Bat mitzvah as a ceremony, rather than as the traditional Jewish legal concept of adulthood applied to a girl from the age of 12, is largely a twentieth-century development, though there were bat mitzvah celebrations in nineteenth-century Egypt, Italy, Baghdad, and Europe.⁵⁸ Indeed, the elaborate celebrations now associated with the bar mitzvah only began to develop in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.⁵⁹ In British Orthodox communities, the ‘standard’ for a bar mitzvah boy is to start wearing *tefilin*, usually several months before his thirteenth birthday, to be called up to the Torah on the sabbath after his birthday (during which he may read

⁵⁵ R. David Mason, phone interview, 1 Aug. 2013.

⁵⁶ This serves as a further confirmation of the ‘marketing’ origin and nature of these ceremonies, since changes that allow women greater participation in ritual, such as women’s *tefilah* groups, are routinely condemned by rabbinic authorities as innovations with no basis in tradition. See Ch. 4, section on women’s *tefilah* groups.

⁵⁷ See Ch. 4.

⁵⁸ Joseph, ‘Bat Mitzvah’, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

part or all of the weekly Torah portion and *haftarah*), and to have a party. Some boys also begin wearing a *talit* (prayer shawl), though many Ashkenazi men do not wear one until they marry. The celebration of a girl's religious majority thus presents Orthodox communities with a challenge: since Orthodox women do not wear *tefilin*, read publicly from the Torah, or wear a *talit*,⁶⁰ how should a girl's bat mitzvah be marked, if at all?

The first modern bat mitzvah ceremony, in 1922, was associated with Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan (1881-1983), who had Orthodox ordination but was teaching at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York; the first American Reform bat mitzvah was held in 1931, and by the 1960s bat mitzvah ceremonies were widely celebrated by the American Conservative movement, though it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that they reproduced the form of the bar mitzvah.⁶¹ British Jews were slower to adopt the practice, with the Liberal movement in the 1960s requiring that any family whose sons had a bar mitzvah undertake to let their daughters have a bat mitzvah,⁶² the Reform movement introducing the practice in the 1970s,⁶³ and the Masorti movement following suit in the 1980s.⁶⁴

Orthodox rabbis, aware only of non-Orthodox precedents for bat mitzvah celebrations, did not favour their introduction.⁶⁵ However, popular demand for public recognition of girls' passage to religious adulthood led to a compromise in the 1960s, when a ceremony known as a *bat hayil*⁶⁶ was instituted for groups of girls aged 12, sometimes after they had completed the synagogue *heder* (religious school). It was usually held on a Sunday, sometimes in a synagogue,⁶⁷ with the girls reciting prayers or reading Proverbs 31: 1-31, a biblical description of the 'ideal woman'.⁶⁸ However, many girls felt the ceremony was impersonal and meaningless; a young mother

⁶⁰ A small number of Orthodox women in Israel and the USA wear *talit* and/or *tefilin*, but as far as I know there is only one Orthodox woman in the UK who wears a *talit*; none wear *tefilin*.

⁶¹ Hyman, 'Bat Mitzvah'.

⁶² Rigal and Rosenberg, *Liberal Judaism*, 255-6.

⁶³ Kershaw and Romain, *Tradition and Change*, 336.

⁶⁴ A Masorti interviewee remembered group bat mitzvahs in the early 1980s on Shavuot, like the Orthodox *bat hayil* (Cherie Jackson, interview).

⁶⁵ See Joseph, 'Bat Mitzvah' and Brown, 'Bat Mitzvah'.

⁶⁶ 'Daughter of valour', based on Proverbs 31: 10, *eshet hayil*, 'woman of valour'.

⁶⁷ Hubert, *Jewish Woman's Handbook*, 23 records a bat mitzvah in synagogue in 1975 as a novelty.

⁶⁸ Traditionally recited by a man in honour of his wife on Friday night, before *kidush* and the sabbath meal.

remembers refusing to participate in one, though both her elder sisters had, as she felt it had no significance.⁶⁹ Katherine Marks participated in the second *bat hayil* held in Ilford United Synagogue, in 1967: ‘My *bat hayil* was a completely meaningless experience in that it was one of those things [like] when Napoleon baptized his soldiers by running a hose over all of them at once, it was quite similar to that, really, in that there were a group of 25 of us.’ The girls read Proverbs 31, in Hebrew and English, and had tea afterwards in the Town Hall, where they were addressed by Lady Jakobovits, the wife of the Chief Rabbi. Katherine recalled being acutely aware that the ceremony was ‘a very scaled down version’ of her brother’s bar mitzvah. Reflecting on a *bat hayil* ceremony at Pinner United Synagogue in the 1980s, Jaq Nicholls, a Modern Orthodox artist, was struck by its lack of relevance:

We had to say bits of random prayers in Hebrew and English [...] at the time I thought it was nonsense, and I was one of the good girls. I won lots of prizes in cheder, not least for the bat chayil project, ‘a Jewish woman and her home’ [...] None of it was about who we were as individuals; even being made to write some bland nonsense about our Hebrew name or favourite Jewish heroine would have been an improvement.⁷⁰

The *bat hayil*’s shortcomings led to pressure for more individualized ceremonies, and today the individual bat mitzvah is the norm in most United synagogues, with the group *bat hayil* being characteristic of more *haredi* synagogues.⁷¹ The rabbi of Bushey United Synagogue thought that the decline of the *bat hayil* was linked to changes in Jewish education (possibly as better Jewishly-educated girls are more capable of producing something for an individual bat mitzvah?), but did not note the widespread resentment at having to share a generalized celebration with other girls.⁷²

Individual synagogues develop their own guidelines, largely dependent on the rabbi’s decision on what is permissible. At Yeshurun Synagogue, a Federation synagogue in Edgware, the girl’s father may receive an *aliyah* on the occasion her bat mitzvah and

⁶⁹ Brenda Johns, interview.

⁷⁰ Untitled document on *bat hayil* at <<http://www.jcclondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/bat-chayil.pdf>> (accessed 30 July 2013).

⁷¹ The only example I could find of *bat hayil* being offered at a non-*haredi* synagogue was on the website of Bushey United Synagogue, <<http://www.busheyus.org/index.php/bar-bat-mitzvah-bat-chayil>> (accessed 31 July 2013), though the synagogue’s rabbi said they had only been held in the 1980s and 1990s, and had since been superseded by bat mitzvahs; email from R. Meir Salasnik, 28 Aug. 2013.

⁷² Ibid.

the girl is congratulated during the announcements, but anything else, such as the girl giving a *devar torah*, would happen at a private event. Bat mitzvah innovations in the *haredi* sector include the girl organizing a fundraising project for a Jewish charity—a natural extension of the strong emphasis on women’s *hesed* (welfare) work that would confirm rather than challenge gender roles in *haredi* society.

The nature of bat mitzvah ceremonies is still fluid, with occasional examples of families trying to push for greater parity with bar mitzvahs, though this is usually rejected by the rabbinic establishment. In late 2011, Dr Alexis Brassey, a member of Hampstead Garden Suburb United Synagogue, whose eldest daughter was approaching bat mitzvah, asked the London Beth Din to find a way to allow her to have an *aliyah*.⁷³ The Beth Din turned down his request, on the grounds that ‘Our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers all loved the Torah no less than ourselves but were never called up to the Torah. That practice of “omission” hence dictates that it is forbidden to call women up.’⁷⁴

The most usual format is for the girl to prepare a *devar torah*, often related to the weekly Torah portion, which she delivers either after the sabbath morning service, or just before its end, after the obligatory prayers and before *adon olam*. This is a deliberate policy, in order to avoid the girl’s participation in the service proper. Some families prefer to hold the ceremony on Sunday morning.⁷⁵

The girl usually studies with a tutor,⁷⁶ often the local *rebetsn*; different tutors will have very different approaches to the subject matter, the level of study, and control over the final text. In some synagogues, the rabbi or a warden will read the speech in advance, and may modify it. The limited and somewhat sidelined nature of this type of bat mitzvah ceremony has led to variations, often urged by the girl’s family; ten years ago, at Stanmore United Synagogue, one girl read the previous sabbath’s

⁷³ A copy of his analysis of the relevant halakhic literature was published by the *Jewish Chronicle* and is available at <<http://www.thejc.com/blogs/simon-rocker/should-batmitzvah-girls-be-called-torah>>; see also Rucker, ‘Why Can’t My Girl Be Called to the Torah?’.

⁷⁴ The Beth Din did not address the halakhic arguments in Dr Brassey’s request; see Rucker, ‘Beth Din’.

⁷⁵ For a typical format, see <<http://www.borehamwoodshul.org/lifecycle/batmitzvah.asp>> (accessed 30 July 2013).

⁷⁶ I have tutored bat mitzvah girls for the last 10 years, and much of this information is based on my experience.

haftarah in the traditional chant on a Sunday morning, as well as giving a *devar torah*.⁷⁷ At South Hampstead United Synagogue, with support and participation from the rabbi and *rebetsn*, a girl read the Torah portion from a *humash* at an all-women Rosh Hodesh service on a Sunday,⁷⁸ and later gave her *devar torah* during a party, held at the synagogue.

However, sometimes the girl and her family want more than the rabbi is willing to permit in synagogue, and in recent years bat mitzvah celebrations are increasingly being held in private homes, sometimes in a marquee in the garden, or in rented halls. At these, the girl often *leyens*⁷⁹ the Torah portion from a Torah scroll, often at an all-women service. In one case, a girl had a standard bat mitzvah at her local United Synagogue, and another, involving *leyening* from a Torah scroll, at a *havurah* to which her family belongs;⁸⁰ in June 2014 another girl read the book of Ruth on the second day of Shavuot at a private service held at her home.⁸¹ In Stanmore, several girls have *leyened* (from a *humash*) or read *haftarah* at the Stanmore Women's Tefillah Group.⁸² Many United Synagogue girls and their families are searching for meaningful, personal ceremonies to celebrate a spiritual landmark, showing remarkable creativity: personal charity projects, study projects, and family history research projects have been designed, or traditional Jewish women's skills have been acquired and used in celebrations such as *halah* parties.⁸³ The London School of Jewish Studies has been running a mother-and-daughter study course for bat mitzvah girls (Kolot), designed and taught by women, since 2000; approximately 30-40

⁷⁷ This seems to have been a 'one-off', during the tenure of the previous rabbi; the format does not appear on the synagogue's current list of options for bat mitzvah, which include: 'Shabbat service with D'var Torah in shul; Sunday afternoon ceremony in shul; midweek ceremony in shul; lunch at home with special ceremony; function with special ceremony; women's tephillah group ceremony', <<http://www.sacps.org.uk/barmitzvah-advice.pdf>> (accessed 31 July 2013).

⁷⁸ This was actually a women's *tefilah* group, of the type described in Ch. 4. It proved very popular, and a few more were held on Sundays that coincided with Rosh Hodesh.

⁷⁹ The anglicized Yiddish word for the traditional chanting of the text.

⁸⁰ The *havurah* movement started in the USA in the 1960s, with small groups of Jews reacting to the over-institutionalized nature of religious life by meeting for sabbath and festival celebrations. There are a few *havurot* in the UK, whose members are mostly from Masorti or Reform backgrounds.

⁸¹ She also prepared a *devar torah* which she delivered after the service at her family's (United) synagogue three weeks later. The book of Ruth is traditionally read (by a man) on Shavuot, usually from a printed version; the bat mitzvah girl read it from a handwritten scroll, a much more ambitious undertaking.

⁸² See Ch. 4. Over 100 women usually attended these bat mitzvah celebrations, held at a hall rented from a local (non-Jewish) school. The girls' immediate male relatives were allowed in to hear her read and sat at the back, a somewhat ironic reversal of women's presence on the sidelines of standard synagogue events.

⁸³ See Ch. 4.

mother-daughter pairs registered for it in 2013. The emphasis is on textual study of outstanding women in the Bible and later Jewish tradition, rather than on socialization as future wife and mother.

Older women who missed the opportunity of having a bat mitzvah often regret this, and in 2013 the *rebetsn* of Stanmore United Synagogue ran an eight-week ‘adult bat mitzvah’ course for 25 women.⁸⁴ The curriculum included learning to bake *halah*, a lecture on the importance of *kashrut*, a tour of a *mikveh*,⁸⁵ tea with the Chief Rabbi’s wife, and the option of writing and delivering a *devar torah*—an interesting combination of central elements of women’s traditional role, such as running a kosher kitchen and observing the laws of ‘family purity’, and newer elements such as Torah study.⁸⁶ The women received a certificate and a joint blessing in synagogue at the end of the course.

Bat mitzvah provides an example of a fairly new public ritual that is still in flux, largely because of the inherent tension involved in women’s participation in synagogue ceremonies, even if they are barely teenagers. There is strong pressure from non-*haredi* parents, and sometimes the girls themselves, on the synagogue authorities to provide a ceremony that parallels the bar mitzvah, reflecting broader British social concerns about gender equality and the empowerment of girls. This has led to the abandonment of the group *bat hayil* ceremony in most United synagogues, and the introduction of a range of ‘compromise’ bat mitzvah ceremonies focusing on individual girls.

The rabbis seem to be fighting a rearguard action to disassociate these ceremonies from public worship, insisting that girls deliver their bat mitzvah talks after the service, outside the synagogue sanctuary, or not on the sabbath. The dissatisfaction felt by many families with these ‘second-best’ options is reflected both in the alternative bat mitzvah ceremonies held outside the synagogue, and in the occasional challenge to the authorities to justify their refusal to allow girls to experience the same treatment as boys on reaching religious maturity. Alternative settings such as

⁸⁴ <<http://youandus.theus.org.uk/womens-view/features/being-part-of-an-adult-batmitzvah-group/>> (accessed 10 Sept. 2013).

⁸⁵ Ritual bath. Several women had never been to one before. See Ch. 5.

⁸⁶ This element was optional; it was clearly felt that some women might be put off by this innovation.

women's *tefilah* groups, women's Megillah readings, *halah* parties, and the new partnership *minyanim* (see Chapter 4) have served as public but 'non-official' arenas for bat mitzvah celebrations, and this trend seems to be on the rise in the Modern Orthodox sector. The recent origin of bat mitzvah ceremonies and their consequent lack of standardization or halakhic constraints serve as a spur to the quest for innovation and relevance, and enable a high degree of creativity, in contrast to the 'sausage factory' of United Synagogue bar mitzvah celebrations, largely determined by precedent and social expectations. It seems likely that bat mitzvah will continue to be a contested space in which non-*haredi* women seek to make their voices heard and their presence felt.

In contrast, the *bat hayil* ceremony is still being held in some *haredi* contexts, where women are far less likely to challenge the status quo, or seek participation in 'male' contexts such as the synagogue. The highly gender-segregated nature of *haredi* society means that innovations in bat mitzvah celebrations usually occur 'invisibly' within the 'women's world' of *hesed* activity rather than in the ritual sphere.

C. Funerals, *kadish*, and *yortsayt*

Jewish funerals are organized by burial societies attached to synagogue organizations; thus the United Synagogue, the Federation, and the UOHC all maintain their own cemeteries and burial societies. The UOHC burial society (popularly known as the 'Adas'⁸⁷) maintains a policy of excluding women from attendance at funerals, while the other societies permit it.⁸⁸ Some women find this upsetting, and refuse to comply. Leonie Adelman, a traditionalist woman in her 50s whose parents had belonged to the Adas burial scheme, had to fight to attend her mother's funeral. She asked other women friends and relations to join her, since 'they couldn't throw them out,' but was very conscious of official disapproval, as

⁸⁷ Its formal name is the Adath Yisroel Burial Society.

⁸⁸ The custom of women not attending funerals is kabbalistic in origin, based on a statement in the Zohar ('Vayakhel', 196) that 'Satan dances' at funerals; this was incorporated in Karo, *Shulhan arukh* 'Yoreh de'ah' 359, where paragraph 1 notes that women should follow the coffin rather than precede it, and paragraph 2 rules that women should not enter the cemetery for the actual burial. See the email exchange between R. Aryeh Frimer and Zev Spero, *Avodah*, 26 (no. 58), at <<http://www.aishdas.org/avodah/vol26/v26n058.shtml>> (accessed 26 Aug. 2013). Most non-*haredi* communities do not prohibit women's attendance, and Lamm's popular handbook, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, does not mention this custom.

well as being shocked at the hastiness and lack of respect shown during the funeral itself. She has since left the Adas burial scheme and joined that of the United Synagogue.⁸⁹ Nor is this an isolated example—the Preston Report noted that:

Overwhelmingly, women insisted that they should have the right to attend funerals if they felt inclined to do so. Considerable numbers felt that it was not only unjust but also extremely unfeeling to ban a woman from attending the funeral of someone with whom she was closely connected, purely on gender terms. Many of these women expressed their hurt and anger at having been prevented from doing so.⁹⁰

The Report also recorded instances of rabbis refusing to perform funerals when women insisted on being present.

Although allowed to attend funerals, United Synagogue women (and men) were not allowed to deliver eulogies (*hespedim*) until 2008; previously only rabbis had the right to speak at funerals.⁹¹ At this point too, women were allowed to take part in the ritual of filling the grave,⁹² which had only been permitted to men until then. Women have taken advantage of these changes and now often deliver *hespedim* themselves, as well as helping to fill the grave. Saying *kadish* at the graveside may be more difficult, and depends on the attitude of the rabbi conducting the funeral.

Though the saying of *kadish* for a parent at the thrice-daily formal services for eleven months after the death is of late origin,⁹³ it has become central to Jewish mourning customs, and is particularly important in creating a sense of community among men. Katherine Marks, who observed her husband's performance of the ritual after losing his mother, felt a distinct sense of envy, knowing that she would not discover the same sense of consolation when she loses her own parents: 'I quite envied him, the complete naturalness of it, the support that he got, and also, which I'm *really* envious of, the immense comfort he got from saying it in the *minyan*, to be in *shul* when it's said.'

⁸⁹ Leonie Adelman, interview.

⁹⁰ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 73.

⁹¹ Alderman, 'Yes, Bury the Absurd Eulogy Rule'.

⁹² As burial is regarded as a commandment and an act of charity towards the deceased, mourners are encouraged to assist by shovelling in a spadeful of earth. See Lamm, *Jewish Way*, 65.

⁹³ See Wieseltier, *Kaddish*.

Some United synagogues welcome women saying *kadish*, but the majority of *haredi* synagogues do not permit the practice. A booklet recently issued by Borehamwood United Synagogue for the guidance of bereaved members rules: ‘A woman mourner may recite the Kaddish at any service provided there is at least one man reciting Kaddish at the same time.’⁹⁴

Many women have never even contemplated saying *kadish* for a relative; Leonie Adelman, though insisting on attending her mother’s funeral, did not want to say *kadish*, either at the funeral or during the year of mourning, since she ‘was not brought up with it’. Sheila Dorfman, describing her first husband’s death in the 1990s, felt very strongly that *kadish* should be said for him by somebody who had known him, but never considered herself in this role:

I can’t bear the idea of paying someone to say *kadish* for you. I think if you’ve got a connection to the person, that is the whole point of saying *kadish*. When my first husband died, there was me and three daughters, and there was nobody—my brother doesn’t go to *shul* every day, and he said he would say *kadish* on the days when he did go to *shul*, and I was *not* going to do anything about somebody else saying *kadish*, when a good friend of ours who does go to *shul* every day said ‘Can I please say *kadish* for him?’ and I was *so* touched that he was prepared to do that.⁹⁵

The Preston Report recorded that ‘Several women reported that although on becoming mourners they had instinctively wished to say Kaddish, they lacked the energy to fight for the right at such a vulnerable time and in an emotionally weakened state.’⁹⁶ Recently, however, there have been steps to encourage women to say *kadish*; in September 2011 Dayan Binstock of the London Beth Din and his wife Rachel Binstock gave a *shiur* on the practice:

Many women have grown up with the idea that it is not permissible for them to say Kaddish. [...] Dayan Binstock emphasised that women mourners who wish to say Kaddish may join the men in doing so. Women who wish to do so are welcome in St. John’s Wood synagogue throughout

⁹⁴ <<http://www.borehamwoodshul.org/lifecycle/files/BasicGuideForTheBereaved.pdf>> (accessed 25 Aug. 2013).

⁹⁵ It is interesting to contrast her feelings and assumptions with those of Henrietta Szold (1860-1945), an American Orthodox Zionist leader, who as the eldest of 8 daughters insisted on saying *kadish* for her mother in 1916, politely declining an offer from a male family friend to say it on her behalf; see her letter to Hayim Peretz, quoted in Wieseltier, *Kaddish*, 189-90.

⁹⁶ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 73.

their year of mourning, both at the Shabbat morning service and at the daily minyan, and on the Shabbat preceding their *yahrzeit*.⁹⁷

Some women do experience some degree of support when they decide to take on the recitation of *kadish*. Very unusually, Ariella Julian, a 40-year-old unmarried United Synagogue woman, recited *kadish* for her father in 1998 for the full eleven months, three times a day. Her local synagogue and rabbi supported her, and she encountered no problems even when she had to resort to the hasidic Hagers synagogue: ‘nobody turned me away, or ridiculed or questioned me’, though elsewhere ‘there was slight ridicule at times, but nothing hostile’. She felt very separate from ‘the old boys’ club’ of men and said *kadish* very quietly; on hearing a female friend recite *kadish* loudly and confidently at her father’s *shiva* in 2012, she noted that ‘it was quite a revelation, as women still say it apologetically’, though she felt that the situation for women who want to say *kadish* has started to improve rapidly in the last few years: ‘the huge widespread sense that women *can’t* do things is changing’.

Nevertheless, many women continue to feel that they have no support and may face opposition if they say *kadish*, and that they have no way of marking *yortsayt* for relatives. A woman quoted in the Preston Report noted that every year, on her father’s *yortsayt*, she had to persuade her reluctant brother to go to synagogue, since there was no way in which she could perform this duty, and her loss would not even be recognized if he did not attend: ‘If I go alone, no-one in shul knows that I have a *Yahrzeit* and as a result I have never been wished “long life”.’⁹⁸ Her words were echoed by Nicola Perlman, a United Synagogue woman in her 60s, who explained why the commemoration of *yortsayt* at the Stanmore Women’s Tefillah Group was so important:

If I have a *yortsayt*, and I want the name to be mentioned in *shul*, so they will say, for my father, ‘for [name]’, nobody would know that that is my father. So no-one would wish me long life, or whatever ... it’s just another name.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ <<http://youandus.theus.org.uk/womens-view/features/kaddish-class-for-women/>>, posted 10 Jan. 2012 (accessed 25 Aug. 2013).

⁹⁸ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 74. ‘I wish you long life’, or just ‘Long life’ is the standard Anglo-Jewish condolence.

⁹⁹ See also Ch. 4, p. 140.

When a man commemorates a dead relative the connection is obvious, as he is given an *aliyah*; if a woman appoints a proxy to do this,¹⁰⁰ the community cannot identify her as the mourner. At the Tefillah Group, each bereaved woman read a prayer for her loved ones, and was the focus of the group's attention and support.

Due to the trauma and emotional turmoil of bereavement, public rituals surrounding death are an even more powerful source of tension than bat mitzvah ceremonies. Although many women accept traditional limitations on women's participation (or even presence) in these rituals, there seems to be an increasing number of non-*haredi* women who refuse to accept these barriers, to the point where they are willing to challenge them in public and even leave community institutions over them (unlike bat mitzvah, individuals cannot organize alternative funerary rituals, so dissatisfaction is expressed differently). The United Synagogue has recently responded to this pressure, granting women parity with men in delivering eulogies and filling the grave; it is significant that disputes over funerals are frequently the occasion of individuals and families leaving a synagogue or even joining a different denominational movement altogether. Though burial rights are the 'glue' of Anglo-Jewish synagogue affiliation,¹⁰¹ funerals and the associated rituals can also serve as tinderboxes, setting off rupture with the community. Since synagogue membership funds the United Synagogue, the institution cannot afford to alienate its members; perhaps uniquely in the sphere of Jewish ritual, United Synagogue women do have some bargaining power in this area. Once again, *haredi* women are far more likely to conform to their community's expectations, and since they are not members of synagogues in their own right (see below), they cannot wield the same economic power as their United Synagogue sisters.

¹⁰⁰ The Preston Report records that many synagogues send a standard letter to women before a *yortsayt* offering them the option of 'nominating a man to mark the event by proxy'. See Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 74.

¹⁰¹ 'It was reported that some women's sole reason for remaining affiliated to a synagogue was in order to safeguard their right to be buried in a Jewish cemetery', Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 75.

Simhat Torah

The festival of Simhat Torah ('Rejoicing of the Torah') is a mediaeval innovation, originating in Babylon in the geonic period,¹⁰² and held on the second day of the biblical festival of Shemini Atseret, in the autumn. It celebrates the conclusion of the annual round of Torah reading and the commencement of the new cycle. At the morning service, two men are honoured by being called up to complete the reading and start the new cycle; they bear the titles *hatan torah* ('bridegroom of the Torah', who reads the end of Deuteronomy) and *hatan bereshit* ('bridegroom of Genesis', who reads the beginning of Genesis). The main rituals in the morning service are the seven circumambulations (*hakafot*) around the *bimah*, with all the synagogue's Torah scrolls carried in procession, often with energetic dancing, and the calling up of every man present to read from the Torah (*aliyot*), ending with the readings by the two *hatanim*.¹⁰³ The *hakafot* can last for an hour or more, and the *aliyot* go on for even longer, even though large synagogues hold several simultaneous readings in order to speed things up. In most synagogues, women take no part in the *hakafot* or the *aliyot*, and have nothing to do but watch the men, who are often fuelled by alcohol. Where there are several Torah readings within the synagogue, the general hubbub often means that the women cannot hear any of them.¹⁰⁴

In 2013 I toured seven synagogues in Hendon on Simhat Torah morning; in all but two, the few women present chatted to each other continuously without lowering their voices, only breaking off to deal with over-excited children when they burst into the gallery clutching bags of sweets. They completely ignored the dancing below. Many more women stood outside the main hall or the synagogue building, chatting to friends of both sexes and supervising children. The exceptions were the *haredi* Hendon Adas, where about twenty women and some teenage girls silently followed the Torah reading, and the 'young' Modern Orthodox Alei Tzion, where about fifty women crammed into the women's section to hear the *hatanim* reading their *aliyot*, following attentively. Two of the women were wearing plastic 'golden' crowns, marking their role either as the wives of the *hatanim* or as women chosen as

¹⁰² Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 117.

¹⁰³ The *hakafot* are performed at the evening service too; many synagogues hold a Torah reading with five *aliyot* in the evening, but without the *hatanim* ceremony.

¹⁰⁴ Keturah Allweiss, interview; I observed this at Ner Yisrael, Hendon, where none of the three simultaneous readings was audible from the women's section.

eshet hayil.¹⁰⁵ The practice of choosing two women to honour in this way, adopted by some United synagogues, is an attempt to include women in the festivities, but as there is usually no active role for the *eshet hayil*, it smacks of tokenism.

This festival points up women's spectator status particularly sharply, and most women I interviewed expressed emotions ranging from active dislike to indifferent disdain for the celebrations. A woman in her 70s from the United Synagogue said that she felt 'totally alienated' on Simhat Torah; another elderly United Synagogue member described it as 'a man's festival', and a third, younger woman with young children said that she insists on going to Israel every year for Simhat Torah as she 'can't bear the thought of Simhat Torah in England'. Keturah Allweiss, a young mother who had experienced Simhat Torah in America at synagogues that encouraged women's participation, was devastated when she returned to England:

I remember coming to Simhat Torah at Norrice Lea and crying, really crying and crying and crying. I remember being in the gallery and them [the men] saying, 'OK, has everyone had an *aliyah*?' And I have said to the rabbi, 'Not everyone has had an *aliyah*. I haven't had an *aliyah*.'

The atmosphere of exclusion is vividly described by Katherine Marks:

I don't think it's offensive, I just think it's thoughtless and exclusive, all that stuff around the *bimah*, all the men are patting their backs and having private jokes and drinking, and sort of that whole lovely 'You're a man' and 'You belong here and this is what it's all for', and you're standing there *watching* it, from a gallery [...] it's not again so much my thing, that I'm so desperate to dance with the *sefer torah*, but I do find the whole thing just utterly utterly depressing.

Nothing has changed from the views recorded in 1994 in the Preston Report: 'The dissatisfaction expressed with mainstream Orthodox Simchat Torah services was overwhelming. More than at any other time of the year women felt marginalised, literally "spectators at a men-only sport" [...] both women and young girls reported feeling degraded, "like monkeys in a cage"'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Lit. 'a woman of valour', a phrase taken from Prov. 31: 1. A parallel to the titles given to the male honorees would logically be *kalat torah* and *kalat bereshit* ('bride of the Torah' and 'bride of Genesis') and would imply equality, as well as a link to the Torah.

¹⁰⁶ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 34.

Haredi women expressed less resentment, but had very low expectations of personal participation beyond watching the men. One young *haredi* mother, whose small daughters had been barred from dancing with their father in the men's section of a Golders Green synagogue, endured a cramped women's section in another synagogue so that her children would be able to dance with their father. She recalled having a very negative experience herself as a child, and was insistent that her daughters should not repeat this. When asked what she would regard as an ideal Simhat Torah experience for herself, she simply repeated that she wanted her daughters to enjoy it, and could not imagine that she might herself have an enjoyable or spiritually meaningful experience. Liora Lachsman, a single academic in her 30s from a hasidic background, reflected on her changing feelings about Simhat Torah in a hasidic synagogue:

The younger girls, including me, would try to squeeze to the front of the ladies and push the curtain aside to get a good view of the leibedik [lively] dancing and singing [...] Eventually, when I hit my teens, it really became a non-event for me. I might have continued going out of habit, but really, apart from some half-hearted attempts by other teenage girls to do our own dancing in a separate room (the light was off), I just stopped going. I don't remember feeling angry; more like a bit bored—even though the singing and dancing were quite lively in the men's section—and I stayed at home to read.¹⁰⁷

Many women, both *haredi* and United Synagogue, simply stay away from the synagogue on Simhat Torah. Belinda Cohen noted that after her children had grown up she had stopped going, because 'at Stanmore [United Synagogue] the men drink, you never know where anybody is, it's unseemly'. Others cited boredom as the main factor for their absence. Even where United Synagogue women have succeeded for a few years in their attempt to participate, their activities have recently been curtailed. Alei Tzion allowed women to dance with a Torah scroll for its first few years of existence,¹⁰⁸ until a new rabbi from Israel decided to forbid it, although it was halakhically permissible, as 'it was not the custom of the synagogue'.¹⁰⁹ Similarly at Edgware United Synagogue, a new rabbi recently overturned a former rabbi's

¹⁰⁷ Liora Lachsman, email, 12 Sept. 2013.

¹⁰⁸ It was founded in 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Information from a former member. Women from this community to whom I spoke in Sept. 2013 were unaware that women had ever danced with a scroll there.

permission for women to dance with a scroll—to some women’s resentment.¹¹⁰ At St John’s Wood United Synagogue, women were not able to dance from 2010 to 2013, as there were several simultaneous services which occupied all the available rooms. At Norrice Lea, the women dance ‘unofficially’ with a scroll, thanks to the intervention of a few men:

They split [the hall] down the middle, the women can dance on one side, the men can dance on the other side. So usually someone like my husband just gives a *sefer torah* to the women. And it’s kind of a *fait accompli*, really, and there are people who are against it, but he usually gives it to me [...] and I dance with it.¹¹¹

Sometimes the women themselves, though unenthusiastic about the lack of any role for them in the festival, cannot bring themselves to overcome the deeply ingrained belief that women are forbidden to touch a Torah scroll because of purity issues.¹¹² In an interview in 2010, Stella James, a very active member of her United Synagogue community who had started a women’s Megillah reading there,¹¹³ recounted that two years previously, she had taken the initiative in getting women to dance with a Torah scroll:

A couple of years ago, I just trotted up to one of our members who was holding a *sefer* [scroll], and I said, ‘Give it to me’, and he gave it to me, and I went to the back with the women, and I said, ‘Come on, let’s get going!’ We did it again this year, and nobody made a sound or a whimper, so I’m going to keep doing it, but the women are quite tentative, I sort of say, ‘Here you are, take it’, [and they say], ‘I don’t feel quite right’, ‘Is it alright that we take it?’

In this case, the women seem to have ‘got away with it’ because of the lack of male opposition and the presence of a determined woman; it is hard to imagine this happening in a synagogue whose rabbi or members are opposed to women dancing with the scrolls. The absence of the Torah scroll from most women’s sections is not solely due to obstacles raised by men, however; the women’s desire to dance with a

¹¹⁰ Shirley Daniels, interview. The rabbi objects to anyone dancing with the scrolls, but cannot stop the men doing so.

¹¹¹ Keturah Allweiss, interview.

¹¹² There is no halakhic support for this (see Weiss, *Women at Prayer*, ch. 7), but the vast majority of British Orthodox women believe it. Cohen, ‘Purity and Piety’, examines the history of this belief, and characterizes it as ‘an expression of folk piety’ (p. 112).

¹¹³ See Ch. 4.

scroll is equally crucial. When I asked the rabbi of Stella's synagogue in 2013 about women's participation in Simhat Torah, he said that although the women do dance, behind a *mehitsah*, they seem uninterested in having a scroll, even though he would not object. It seems that since Stella has not attended Simhat Torah for the last few years, other women were not confident enough, or did not want, to ask for a scroll. On attending Golders Green United Synagogue for Simhat Torah in 2011—where the women had a space and a scroll to dance with—I noted that most women refused to hold the scroll and declined to dance, preferring to stand around the walls and chat. Keturah Allweiss commented that 'I find it very hard to pass it to other women. I'd say 95 percent of the women won't take it. For various reasons, they're scared to drop it, they think they can't.'

At some synagogues, women's participation is actively discouraged. At Hendon United Synagogue, a middle-aged woman who has recently become more observant noted that the rabbi 'allows the women to look and to throw sweets as long as it's not too many', but 'doesn't see the need for women to dance', although they are allowed to do so in the community centre building next to the synagogue. She did not object to this, as she enjoys watching the men, but did note that Simhat Torah is 'a bit of a drag' for women, and that only about thirty women turn up for it, most of whom leave after a few *hakafot*.¹¹⁴ After the women lost their dancing space at St John's Wood Synagogue, a member in her 70s forwarded material on women and Torah scrolls that had been issued by the United Synagogue women's organization to the rabbi and asked for a meeting to discuss it, but he did not respond. The women were reduced to having coffee in the gallery on the festival. In 2013 they were allowed to have 'women's *hakafot*' and dancing during the time the three congregations in the building were dancing outside, but the rabbi stated that it was 'against *halakhah*' for them to have a Torah scroll; pressed further, he explained that this meant that women had to be 'properly' dressed.¹¹⁵ Twenty women participated in the dancing.

Some women have organized alternative activities within their synagogues to celebrate Simhat Torah, often in the form of a learning session. Katherine Marks, a prominent Jewish educator, describes a very successful example:

¹¹⁴ Fiona Inman, interview.

¹¹⁵ Phone conversation and email, Gill Armstrong, 24 July 2013 and 10 Sept. 2013.

About eight or nine years ago, I was invited to give a *shiur* for the women at Muswell Hill, in the morning so there would be something for them to do, so that they would feel an incentive to come, there would be a women's *kidush*, while the *hakafot*, which are endless, were going on. Not that there would be *hakafot* for women, but there would be a women's only thing. Could men come? The rabbi said at that stage he didn't mind, he would rather the men enjoyed that than hung around outside, and one or two used to come [...] So we had a women's *kidush* and a *shiur*, and that was hugely successful, and it was the event of the year for Muswell Hill for the next eight years, when I used to walk over there, and sixty or so women would come, it was completely packed, and I made sure we did some learning from Torah.

Other women's learning sessions have been organized on Simhat Torah: in the year Keturah Allweiss' husband was *hatan torah*, she 'made a little party for the women with a *devar torah*' in a room at the synagogue during the Torah reading, 'and that was very nice, except that it was advertised as "cocktails"'.

Occasionally even these activities have been opposed by rabbis. In Woodside Park several years ago, a group of women decided to meet in a private house on Simhat Torah, invite a (female) teacher, and have a learning session accompanied by coffee. Unfortunately they decided to seek permission from the rabbi (since retired), who immediately refused to allow it. In other communities, small groups of women meet in each others' houses for coffee, chat, and perhaps a short *devar torah*.¹¹⁶ For the vast majority of women, however, the only activity offered is watching the men or accompanying children, and most do not go to synagogue: 'When you have young children you go to *shul* for Simhat Torah. When you don't, you can always stay home with a good book.'¹¹⁷

Some women choose to attend alternative celebrations outside the Orthodox establishment; though the numbers involved are small, these events have continued almost annually over the last 15 years. One woman noted that 'my elder daughter [...] used to sneak off to a Reform *shul* on Simhat Torah so she could dance with a *sefer* [Torah scroll]'.¹¹⁸ In the late 1990s my husband and I organized a Simhat Torah service in a scout hut in Stanmore, with (separate) *hakafot* for men and women,

¹¹⁶ Lesley Sandman, interview.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Katherine Marks, interview.

followed by separate Torah readings for both men and women (with Torah scrolls for both);¹¹⁹ about 20 men and women attended. After moving to Hendon in 2002, I organized women's readings with a Torah scroll on Simhat Torah at Yakar (an independent synagogue); and following Yakar's closure in 2003, at its successor congregation, Ohel Avraham, until its closure in 2009. About twenty to thirty women used to attend.¹²⁰ Two women would be chosen for the honour of *kalat torah* and *kalat bereshit* ('bride of the Torah' and 'bride of Genesis'), in parallel to the men's *hatan torah* and *hatan bereshit*. The atmosphere was always very lively, with energetic singing and dancing, and those who attended found the services very satisfying and would return year after year. Several women expressed interest in attending but felt they should attend their usual synagogues when husbands or other relatives were given the honour of being a *hatan* there, or when a son received a similar honour in the children's service.

There have been continuing alternative Simhat Torah celebrations of this type, with 25 women attending women's Torah readings in a private house in Golders Green in 2011 and 2012,¹²¹ and in 2012 the 'alternative' community Grassroots Jews held its first Simhat Torah event, in the evening,¹²² attended by about sixty men and women, with both sexes reading the Torah and being called up for *aliyot*. In 2013 about 100 men and women attended the second Grassroots Jews Simhat Torah.¹²³ About ten women chose to dance separately in their own circle alongside the larger, mixed circle, with the Torah scroll passed between the two circles, and 25 men and women received an *aliyah*, with some women noting it was the first time they had ever done this.¹²⁴

Simhat Torah brings the exclusion of women from central rituals and contact with the Torah scroll, the most sacred symbolic object, into sharp and uncomfortable

¹¹⁹ Based on the practice of our synagogue in Jerusalem, Kehilat Yedidya.

¹²⁰ See Ch. 4 n. 36.

¹²¹ I attended and helped to organize the first of these.

¹²² For a brief account of Grassroots Jews, a non-denominational group with several Orthodox attendees, see Ch. 4.

¹²³ I attended and helped to organize this.

¹²⁴ The '*aliyot* for all' are usually held in the morning, with only five *aliyot* in the evening, but since the evening reading is customary rather than obligatory, and no synagogue would be offering women *aliyot* in the morning, it was decided to transfer this morning practice to the evening to enable women who wanted an *aliyah* to have one.

relief, creating considerable resentment and indignation among women who sit placidly in a gallery the rest of the year, watching men perform below with no desire to emulate them. Lesley Sandman noted:

This experience of not having the *sefer torah*, and women gathering together—it's not the same thing. Let's be quite honest that learning and discussion, and at its most basic level, words of Torah, are not the same experience as singing and dancing. And it's clear that letting go is not something women are allowed to do. They need to be in control in Judaism.

Not only do women need to be 'in control' of themselves—and perhaps under the control of men—but they are denied physical access to the Torah scroll. The Torah is the central symbol of Orthodox Judaism, but women experience it vicariously, both in its physical manifestation and in its study. The Torah has often been eroticized in classical Jewish culture, as documented by Daniel Boyarin:

The Torah-study situation was structured as a male homosocial community, the life of which was conducted around an erotic attachment to the female Torah. The Torah and the wife are structural allomorphs and separated realms in the culture—both normatively to be highly valued but also to be kept separate.¹²⁵

On Simhat Torah, more than at any other time of the year, such metaphors are given concrete form. Men dance with the Torah scrolls, undress them, open them, and, as 'bridegrooms', consummate their relationship by the act of reading. In the face of such basic metaphors, it is scarcely surprising that women react emotionally and negatively to the presence of the 'other woman', as it is carried, danced with, fondled, celebrated, and 'married' by the men of the community. In terms of this metaphor, women's only role is as jealous onlookers—their relationship to the Torah scroll is deeply problematic, as demonstrated by most traditionalist women's reluctance to touch or carry the scroll, even where permitted and even though there is no halakhic impediment; it 'feels wrong'. As noted above, the recent United Synagogue custom of choosing two women to honour in parallel to the 'bridegrooms' stops short of giving them the title of 'bride'.

¹²⁵ Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 196; Rubinstein, *Culture*, ch. 6 and pp. 154-6, and Weissler, *Voices*, 174.

In *haredi* contexts, where the segregation of men's and women's roles is a central feature of religious ideology, accepted and often justified by women, women are less troubled by being spectators of the men's activities, or avoid the tension by absenting themselves from the synagogue. In non-*haredi* Orthodox communities, individuals' ideals, ethics, expectations, and behaviour are shaped as much by secular trends within wider, Western society as by Jewish influences; hence, the tension is far more palpable. Consequently, both Modern Orthodox and traditionalist women are more likely to express anger and resentment at their sense of frustration and exclusion on Simhat Torah.

The ambivalence about the relationship of women to the Torah, especially in its physical form, may explain why little has been done by women to create alternative ceremonies or events to mark Simhat Torah. Uncertainty about roles provides an opportunity for women to exert agency in redefining them, but there is a higher level of risk attached in a religious culture that defines Jewishness as involvement with Torah, but limits women's access to Torah.

Non-*haredi* women are experiencing a period of flux and tension, in which different individuals choose responses that range from a traditionalist minimal participation and 'compartmentalized' acceptance of a *haredi* ideology in a circumscribed area of 'religious' life, to the more 'Modern Orthodox' quest to redefine gender roles in the religious sphere. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in women's responses to Simhat Torah—from a virtual boycott of the synagogue, to acceptance of their status as spectators, to attempts to organize women's participation.

3. From auxiliaries to leaders: women and synagogue leadership

Although some women held formal titles in the synagogues of ancient Rome, there are no further instances of this until the twentieth century.¹²⁶ Orthodox women in Britain had no representation on communal bodies until the Union of Jewish Women was allowed to send representatives to the Board of Deputies in 1919, and women's

¹²⁶ See Brooten, *Women Leaders*.

representation on synagogue boards only began in 1994.¹²⁷ However, women played a vital if secondary role in the running and expansion of synagogues by means of the Ladies' Guilds: local associations of women who cater sabbath *kidushim* and social functions held at the synagogue, fundraise for improvements to synagogue complexes, and support the community's welfare work. Significantly, most United Synagogue Ladies' Guilds have now vanished, in tandem with the growing opportunities for women to take up formal positions in synagogue management. Further to the right, however, the pace of change is slower or non-existent.

Ladies' Guilds

Until the later twentieth century, relatively few middle-class women had jobs. By mid-century many British Jews had joined the middle class, and therefore most Jewish women had considerable leisure time. Many threw themselves into synagogue-related and charitable organizations, as can be seen from the activities of the Ladies' Guild of Willesden and Brondesbury Synagogue, which apparently consisted of about twenty women:

[In 1946] the ladies made Social afternoons to raise money for various good causes. The Guild's main work was 'collecting food and clothing for our brethren in Europe'. They [...] had sent off 180 sacks of clothing, 150 food parcels, 20 cases of Hebrew books and parcels of tools.¹²⁸

Fully subscribing to the ideal of the modest Jewish woman who enables others while effacing herself, the historian who noted the Guild's achievements also observed that

the Congregation has been underpinned and supported by its Ladies' Guild. They work quietly and efficiently, without bureaucracy (they keep no Minutes), replenishing the fabric of the synagogue and refreshing the inner man. Look at any Annual Report of the Congregation and you will see a tribute to the work of the Ladies' Guild, whose workers work so quietly that their names are hardly known outside their own ranks.¹²⁹

The activities of the Ladies' Guilds provided a degree of status for the synagogue's women and opportunities for socializing and networking. Moreover, it embodied religious and social ideals of Jewish womanhood: nurturing and feeding others,

¹²⁷ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 177-8, and see below.

¹²⁸ Susser, *History*.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

especially children; enabling the men to carry out their obligations of Torah study and prayer; and caring for the weak, elderly, and disadvantaged (known as *hesed*).

Nowadays, however, the heyday of the heroic Ladies' Guilds is gone. Many more Jewish women now have full-time or part-time jobs, and fewer are prepared to devote their scarce leisure time to the self-effacing support of the community; as a United Synagogue woman remarked, 'Most ladies don't want to be seen as waitresses' any more.

At Belmont United Synagogue, where the Guild used to organize the weekly *kidush*, cater special events, fundraise, and look after needy community members, there is now a rota of 15-20 women and a couple of men, aged between 40 and 60, who set out *kidushim*, buying prepared food rather than making it themselves.¹³⁰ A synagogue group called Belmont Community Care has taken over the Guild's welfare functions, and a Functions Committee organizes special lunches; both groups include men and women. Although some food for events is still cooked in the Belmont synagogue kitchen (equipped by the former Ladies' Guild), other United synagogues, such as Stanmore, now use caterers, reflecting women's lack of free time and interest in being unpaid community cooks.¹³¹ The middle-aged and elderly women of the few remaining Guilds and the *kidush* rotas that have replaced them find it very difficult to recruit younger women:

The women with young children don't want to be out at meetings during the week; they're working during the day. The pattern of their lives is very different. And their concerns are very different [...] A lot of the guilds are dying off. [...] Younger women will come and put out a *kidush*, but they're not there to run social and welfare stuff for the *shul*.¹³²

Women's role in synagogue leadership

Reflecting the decline of the Guilds, the United Synagogue Association of Ladies' Guilds (USALG), an umbrella organization, later became the Association of United Synagogue Women (AUSW), though it did little beyond organizing an annual dinner and quiz. In 2009 it was 'rebranded' and revitalized as US Women, which now serves

¹³⁰ Gwen Fishman, phone interview, 23 July 2013.

¹³¹ Another factor might be increasingly stringent *kashrut* standards, and rabbis' reluctance to 'trust' women; see Ch. 5.

¹³² Lesley Sandman, interview.

as a forum for women to engage with issues that affect their religious lives. Lesley Sandman, a former executive member of USALG, recalled that in the 1980s it actively promoted communal and educational projects:

The Ladies' Guilds Association was very instrumental in pushing for the *kashrut* guide.¹³³ They also helped support the United Synagogue *mikvehs* [...] they would organize things like a pre-Rosh Hashanah, pre-Yom Kippur programme, an educational programme [...] Now we have a situation where every *shul* of any stripe has its own educational programme. They didn't then. It was just barren. So we put on these programmes, a day, two days seminar, or an evening and a day seminar, pre-Pesah, pre-Rosh Hashanah, sometimes at other times of the year too. It was very exciting.¹³⁴

Thirty years later, the focus has shifted from welfare and education to women's leadership roles and halakhic issues, though a 2012 report on women in leadership in the Jewish community revealed that they still face greater problems in attaining leadership positions of all types within the community than they do outside it:

In the more orthodox part of the community there is a view that halacha is being used by some inappropriately to keep women from leadership roles. Without an in-depth knowledge of Jewish legal practice, which can be both empowering and effective, women are unable to question its impact on the way some of our organisations are structured and operate.¹³⁵

Building partly on the report's results, US Women organized a series of panel evenings in 2013 entitled 'Women, the Rabbi and the Law', with male and female speakers, to discuss issues such as women lay leaders, women's relationship with the Torah, and bat mitzvah girls. A 'roadshow', or travelling educational programme, entitled 'The Female Jew: Options for the 21st Century', planned for 2014, aimed to educate women on halakhic issues concerning participation in worship and ritual. The organization also held a liaison session for female board of management members, and council members of the United Synagogue, a dinner honouring the wife of the retiring Chief Rabbi, and a liaison meeting for women representatives from different synagogues.

¹³³ *The Really Jewish Food Guide*, published annually by the Kashrut Division of the London Beth Din, lists most food products, classifying them as kosher or non-kosher.

¹³⁴ Another activity was lobbying for the admission of women to synagogue boards of management; see <<http://youandus.theus.org.uk/womens-view/letters/letter-from-joy-conway/>> (accessed 8 Oct. 2013).

¹³⁵ Jewish Leadership Council, *Inspiring Women Leaders*.

The transformation of an umbrella organization for ladies' guilds into a women's advocacy forum embodies the gradual change in non-*haredi* women's self-perception and ambitions. The move to fully-participating members of synagogues, rather than an auxiliary support force, is paralleled by major changes in women's status within synagogues. In 1994 women were allowed 'to be elected to the Council of the United Synagogue and to the boards of management of its constituent synagogues'.¹³⁶ In 2001, they were permitted to be financial representatives or vice-chairmen of boards, but not chairmen, and in December 2012, they could finally serve as synagogue board chairmen.¹³⁷

The first female synagogue chairman was elected in April 2013,¹³⁸ and within a few months nine women had been elected to this position, some of whom had been acting as chairman for years in the absence of any male candidate; 19 women were elected as vice-chairs at the same elections.¹³⁹ In spring 2014, the current management system of seven male trustees and four 'women representatives' of the United Synagogue was replaced by a president (male), and eight trustees, four of each gender; the presidency of the entire organization remains the last male bastion, but even this may change.¹⁴⁰ The general impression is of a grassroots-powered avalanche, rapidly gathering speed as social conventions and halakhic certainties crumble before it.

There are significant signs of change further to the right of the community too. The first women on Federation synagogue boards were elected in May 2013 at Yeshurun Synagogue in Edgware.¹⁴¹ The UOHC has not yet allowed women to be members in their own name, even if they are widowed or divorced and heads of households, but when North Hendon Adath Yisroel Synagogue left the Union,¹⁴² the women of the

¹³⁶ Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 404.

¹³⁷ Rocker, 'United Synagogue Says Yes'.

¹³⁸ Grenby, 'St Albans Woman'.

¹³⁹ The United Synagogue has 62 member synagogues; Dalia Cramer, interview.

¹⁴⁰ Rocker, 'After Chaining Shuls'.

¹⁴¹ Rocker, 'Progress for Women'. Five women were elected to the 12-member board. Dayan Lichtenstein, the senior Federation rabbi, had given his permission for this step five years previously, but no synagogues had acted on it.

¹⁴² This was in the wake of a scandal involving a rabbi alleged to have sexually abused women from his synagogue. The Union authorities refused to expel him or support the victims, and North Hendon Adas members voted to leave in protest. See Rocker, 'London Synagogue Quits'.

synagogue met the rabbi, the chairman, and a board member on 7 May 2013 to discuss women's role and representation in the synagogue:

One of the main topics discussed concerned how the views of women can be heard, and be counted. [...] A number of views were offered but one recurring theme was that the recent issues in the wider community have highlighted the importance of making sure that every voice is heard, and particularly those of women.¹⁴³ A further reason was suggested that the recent EGM had brought into focus the rules of voting set out in the shul's Constitution, and in particular the condition that only male members are eligible to vote. Many felt that there was a disjoint between our prevailing rules and longstanding developments in broader society, as well as changes to the voting rules in other institutions.¹⁴⁴ Finally, while in many cases it's possible for a married couple to cast a joint vote through the husband, this is not always practical, particularly in the cases of single women, divorcees and widows.¹⁴⁵

At the rabbi's suggestion, a 'women's forum' of four was set up to discuss possibilities. The rabbi himself was in favour of a separate AGM for women at which they could vote, since he felt that there were 'issues that are specifically relevant to women on which it would be inappropriate for men to vote, and issues specific to men on which it would inappropriate for women to vote'.¹⁴⁶

The decline of the Ladies' Guilds and rise of women's synagogue leadership during the last two decades encapsulate fundamental changes in the way in which non-*haredi* Orthodox women, both Modern Orthodox and traditionalist, understand their roles and standing within their synagogues. Many have moved from being anonymous and self-sacrificing auxiliaries concerned with providing a safe and functioning environment for male performance to autonomous individuals who are (almost) equal members of the community and who have the right and the responsibility to participate in decision-making for the entire community. The trickle-down effect of feminism in non-Jewish British society is undoubtedly the major factor, reinforced by change in non-Orthodox Jewish denominations, and latterly by change on the left of Orthodoxy. However, greater equality for women

¹⁴³ This refers to the scandal described in n. 142.

¹⁴⁴ A reference to the United Synagogue and Federation.

¹⁴⁵ Report on the meeting on the synagogue's website, <<http://northhendon.co.uk/content/womens-meeting-rov>> (accessed 16 Dec. 2013). The women's forum has a presence on the synagogue website, and women seem to have attended and voted at the March 2014 AGM; see <<http://northhendon.co.uk/sites/default/files/Newsletter%20Supplement%20-%20Edition%201.pdf>> (accessed 8 July 2014).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

remains easier outside the ‘ritual arena’ of synagogue prayer and ceremonies; the sacred remains the largely uncontested domain of men.¹⁴⁷

* * *

This survey of women’s activity and experience in the ‘official’ communal sphere clearly illustrates the different attitudes and strategies of the three groups identifiable in the London Jewish community: *haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist.

Haredi women, who do not subscribe to a Western-liberal ethos, but seek to fashion themselves into pious Jews as defined by their community’s ideals, find it easy to accept their position as spectators and enablers in the public arena, since they view their central sphere of action as home- and family-centred; they have little interest in change or amelioration of their position since they do not experience it as deficient or out of kilter with the rest of their lives.

At the other end of the spectrum, traditionalist women often feel threatened by change, particularly innovations in women’s roles in ritual and communal worship. Rather than serving as vehicles for religious expression and work on the self, the perpetuation of conventional practices serves as a guarantee of their Jewishness, which they define through existing practices.

In contrast, their Modern Orthodox sisters, who struggle to reconcile feminist ideals prevalent in the wider society with a deep commitment to living according to a divinely ordained system of ritual and worship, experience a painful degree of tension, caught between the ideals and imperatives of two very different worldviews. This is why the impetus for change and greater participation for women in communal ritual and leadership comes from this sector of the Jewish community. However, given that the established patterns of synagogue ritual are the core expression and performance of the traditional gender regime of Orthodoxy, they are very difficult to change, and the least gesture in the direction of increasing women’s participation becomes loaded with symbolic meaning. Rather than being interpreted as the

¹⁴⁷ See the discussion of women’s *tefilah* groups in Ch. 4 for the disproportionate level of resistance to women ‘invading’ male rituals and male sacred space.

involvement of hitherto disaffected or excluded members of the community, it is seen as women's aggressive 'invasion' of male territory, and a threat to the essence of male Orthodox gender identity. There is little room here for Bell's strategies of appropriation, empowerment, or negotiation; instead, rabbis and congregants alike consent to maintaining the defining patterns of male domination, centrality, and action, and female submission, marginality, and passivity. Those women who would like to see some change often react with withdrawal and overstated indifference to what goes on in 'the boys' club'. In terms of change in Orthodoxy, communal ritual as performed in synagogue is the final fortress, the last citadel.

Chapter 4: Women's life in the community 2: 'informal'

'I want to strike a blow for women in Orthodoxy [...] I wanted Orthodoxy to open up a little to women. For me, to go and do it under our own steam wasn't what I wanted.' Nicola Perlman, interview

* * *

Alongside women's participation in the 'official' life of the community, examined in the last chapter, a wide range of informal communal activities provides women with religious or spiritual self-expression. It is here that women show most creativity and originality, often adapting or even inventing rituals and opportunities for self-expression. The absence (in most cases) of men means that women can explore new modes of religious action, and sometimes supplies an opportunity to embark on activities that might be unacceptable to rabbis. Rather than a deliberate attempt to evade male supervision, an attempt to challenge religious norms, or some type of 'resistance', this is the result either of women's perceptions of core rituals as open to all Jews, regardless of gender, or of women's lack of theological or halakhic knowledge and consequent failure to realize some of the implications of their actions, in combination with their desire to express themselves as religious women and take an active part in core Jewish rituals and activities. However, sometimes women's attempts to introduce new practices, even if based on detailed knowledge of halakhic issues, can be blocked or delegitimized by the community's male-led institutions; these contested activities can be regarded as the sites of male, rather than female, resistance, in the face of female agency, and contrast sharply with the uncontroversial nature of women's rituals that are initiated, designed, or approved of by (male) rabbinic authority.

Such 'unofficial' activities include women's *tefilah* (prayer) groups, women's Megillah readings, Rosh Hodesh groups, *berakhah* (blessing) parties (also known as amen parties), *tehilim* (Psalms) groups, *halah* (dough) taking parties, certain welfare (*hesed*) activities and groups, *gemahs* (loan societies), various types of bat mitzvah

celebrations, and *simhat bat* celebrations.¹ This chapter will survey some of these, focusing on the nature of each, its origins and development, those who attend, their understanding of the activity, its function and theological underpinnings, and its visibility and level of approval within the wider Jewish community. The activities can be divided into three types: those designed to provide women with a sacred space in which they can pursue spiritual goals (women's *tefilah* groups, Megillah readings, and Rosh Hodesh groups); those designed to aid and protect others in the community (*berakhah* parties, *halah* parties, and *tehilim* groups); and lifecycle events (*simhat bat* ceremonies and bat mitzvah celebrations).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Orthodox women's efforts to create, appropriate, and modify rituals embody and illuminate the multiple choices, narratives, and influences that form part of the complex social and religious landscape they navigate daily. Their strategies for avoiding direct confrontation with the male establishment, and for remaining within the Orthodox community, can also be seen in the more recent phenomenon of partnership *minyanim*, in which halakhic and rabbinic support (from abroad) plays an essential role in participants' attempts to normalize the practice and promote its acceptance in the Anglo-Jewish community. *Haredi* women, in contrast, rarely challenge existing gender norms openly; though they too display considerable creativity in devising new communal rituals and practices, they generally obtain rabbinic approval or active involvement at an early stage, as in the case of *berakhah* parties, and constantly refer to it when promoting new practices.

Creating sacred spaces

1. Women's *Tefilah* Groups (WTGs)

The first documented formal prayer service held by women was in April 1972, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.² On Simhat Torah of that year, a women's *tefilah* group

¹ *Simhat bat*, lit. 'rejoicing of a daughter', one of several names for ceremonies celebrating the birth of a girl.

² Email from Dr Debbie Weissman posted on the Women's Tefilla Network, 19 Jan. 2000. Although there is evidence for women prayer leaders in mediaeval and early modern times (see Weissler, *Voices*, 9), and in many *haredi* schools girls pray together, forming a de facto '*tefilah* group', the social context of modern WTGs is completely different (as shown by the fact that communal prayer in girls' schools is unremarked and uncontroversial).

was held at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York, supported by the synagogue's rabbi, Shlomo Riskin, and WTGs have been held there regularly from December 1972 until the present.³ Other American groups set up WTGs, often in synagogues, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In Israel, an occasional WTG met in a private home from 1972 till about 1979, and by Simhat Torah of 1978 the group that later evolved into the Kehilat Yedidya congregation (established in 1980) was holding women's Torah readings.⁴ Since then groups have been founded throughout North America, and in Israel, Australia, and Canada.⁵ Britain has two surviving groups, one (founded 1993), associated with Stanmore United Synagogue in north-west London and the other (1994) with Yeshurun Synagogue in Manchester. Most WTGs meet every few weeks, typically on sabbath morning, though groups are also organized for particular occasions, such as a bat mitzvah, or for a bride on the sabbath preceding her wedding.⁶ WTGs have also been held on Rosh Hodesh; since Rosh Hodesh is traditionally associated with women, this underlines the 'female' nature of the group and provides a link to more traditional women's practices.⁷

Most WTGs follow the standard sabbath morning service, omitting prayers that require the presence of a *minyan*.⁸ The weekly Torah portion (*parashah*) is sometimes read from a scroll, as in a standard service, and sometimes from a printed Pentateuch (*humash*). Other elements, varying from group to group, include a *derashah* or *devar torah* (text-based sermon), prayers for the sick, memorialization of dead relations, and a prayer for *agunot* (women unable to obtain a Jewish divorce). Most WTGs use a standard Orthodox prayerbook, sometimes supplemented

³ See Becher and Marcus, 'Women's Tefillah Movement', Nusbacher, 'Efforts'; ead., 'Orthodox Jewish Women's Prayer Groups'.

⁴ Email from Dr Debbie Weisman, a participant in both groups, 19 July 2011.

⁵ A list of 56 groups appears on the Edah website, <<http://www.edah.org/tefilla.cfm>> (accessed 17 Nov. 2015), with 44 in the USA, 7 in Israel, 3 in Canada, and one each in Australia and the UK. The list does not include the Manchester WTG, and is probably not exhaustive.

⁶ Several 'one-off' WTGs have been held for bat mitzvah celebrations in the UK (see Ch. 3), usually in private homes; at least three were held in 2006-2011.

⁷ Observation of the new moon is biblically prescribed (Exod. 12: 2); the first traditions linking it to women appear in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ta'anit* 1: 6), which records that women customarily abstained from work on Rosh Hodesh. See Berrin (ed.), *Celebrating the New Moon*.

⁸ These are *barkhu* (the 'call to prayer'), *kedushah* (an antiphonal doxology recited during the repetition of the *amidah* prayer), and *kadish* (an Aramaic doxology recited at various points during the service and also as a mourner's prayer). Interestingly, early groups in Israel did recite these prayers (Dr Debbie Weissman, email, 19 July 2011).

by a photocopied sheet that lists the prayers with their page numbers, and the names of women leading the service.

Though there has been rabbinic opposition (notably an 1984 responsum [*teshuvah*] issued by five rabbis from Yeshiva University in New York),⁹ several rabbis have written in support of WTGs, such as Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, who published a halakhic justification of WTGs in 1990.¹⁰ At the time of writing, WTGs are clearly disapproved of in the *haredi* sector, and are viewed with varying degrees of approval in the Modern Orthodox sector.¹¹

History

In Britain, WTGs have been far less popular and have met with greater opposition than in the USA and Israel. The 1994 Preston Report showed a wide range of women's views about them, from the majority of women in provincial communities such as Edinburgh and Leeds, who favoured the status quo, to others, especially younger women, who were more favourably inclined to the introduction of WTGs.¹² Only 4% of the women who responded to the survey had actually attended a WTG.¹³ In the late 1980s and early 1990s a handful of WTGs were held, some in Oxford;¹⁴ the very first seem to have been two Rosh Hodesh WTGs held in Cambridge in 1988, organized by Alexa Neville.¹⁵ A male student concerned about their halakhic status asked Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits if they were permitted; Jakobovits replied that they were and published his *teshuvah*,¹⁶ but they seem to have been irregular events, unreported in the Jewish press.

The only current regular WTG in London is held in Stanmore, north-west London, under the auspices of Stanmore and Canons Park United Synagogue; until September

⁹ Haut, 'Women's Prayer Groups', 146-7.

¹⁰ Weiss, *Women at Prayer*.

¹¹ For a list of articles both opposing WTGs (9 articles) and supporting them (7 articles), see Haut, 'Women's Prayer Groups', n. 1.

¹² Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 29-41, esp. pp. 32-4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴ Beatrice Lang, letter to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Nov. 1992, mentions attending 'three or four services' at Oxford while an undergraduate, apparently between 1989 and 1992. I could not find any more information on these events.

¹⁵ Alexa Neville, interview; she also participated in the first two Stanmore services in 1993.

¹⁶ Interestingly, he allowed the women to use a Torah scroll (after the event had happened); see [Jakobovits], 'From the Chief Rabbi's Correspondence'. See also the leader, 'Politics and Halacha', *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 Feb. 1994; Lee, 'Women Await Halachic Ruling'.

2011 it was excluded from the synagogue premises.¹⁷ Interviews with three founder members produced somewhat conflicting versions of the group's origins: in one, the local rabbi, Dr Jeffrey Cohen, learnt about WTGs on a visit to America and promoted the idea on his return, directly approaching the women; the second account credited one of the founders of the group, Linda Stone, with asking Rabbi Cohen whether he would support such a group after hearing him talk about the American WTGs at a private dinner; and the third account, by Linda Stone, records that she wrote to the rabbi to propose the foundation of such a group, and received a positive reply.¹⁸ Rabbi Cohen himself remembered giving a sermon on the topic shortly after his return from the USA, after which he was approached by women who were interested in the idea. The disparate accounts seem to reflect a concern with the origin of the enterprise: the more conventional women preferred to attribute it to the rabbi, while those less concerned with social approval claimed that the impetus came from the women.

They found a (male) teacher to instruct them in the traditional chanting of the Torah (*leyening*, usually only taught to men) and prepared for their first service in late 1992. The original intention was to hold the service in Stanmore Synagogue's library, but when a formal request for permission, supported by Rabbi Cohen,¹⁹ was presented at a board meeting a week before the event, 'all hell broke loose'.²⁰ A vote approved the service by a majority of two, but that Friday an article about the proposal appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle*,²¹ after details were leaked by a Stanmore community member who objected to the idea, and plans were halted. After initial support from the Chief Rabbi, the official position changed, and the following week Rabbi Cohen was informed that the London Beth Din objected to the plans.²² A storm of readers' letters to the *Jewish Chronicle*, both supportive and opposing, followed in short order, transforming a small-scale enterprise at a single synagogue into a community-wide debate that was covered in the national press.²³ Accompanied

¹⁷ Rocker, 'Stanmore Women Meet in Shul at Last'.

¹⁸ Interviews with Nicola Perlman, Sheila Dorfman, and Linda Stone.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Nicola Perlman, interview; her husband, a member of the board, was present at the meeting.

²¹ Bass, 'Women-Only Services Planned'.

²² Rabbi Cohen, interview.

²³ Wachmann, 'Why Are Men So Scared?'; Bermant, 'Time for Chief'; Hinds, 'Women-Only Worship'; letters to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Nov. 1992.

and supported by Rabbi Cohen, the women's representatives visited both the Chief Rabbi and the London Beth Din,²⁴ and the Chief Rabbi subsequently issued the following conditions:

1. The women were 'advised' that no Torah scroll should be used.
2. No prayers requiring the presence of a male quorum could be said.
3. The service could not take place on synagogue premises.

The women did not mind the second condition, since they had never intended to recite the quorum-dependent prayers, and only some were troubled by the first condition,²⁵ but they were all upset by the ban on using synagogue premises. The London Beth Din did not provide the women with any halakhic rationale beyond expressing a concern over 'how it would appear' were women to pray as a group in a synagogue, and that such a group would be 'divisive'.²⁶

The first service was held on 27 February 1993, at the house of Celia and Elkan Levy (then President of the United Synagogue). About 60 women attended,²⁷ of all ages, and the founders were encouraged to continue. The lead-up to the service and the event itself were extensively reported in the *Jewish Chronicle* and other Jewish newspapers,²⁸ and for the first year or so the group was eagerly followed and commented on; the women were chosen as 'JC Newsmaker of the Year' by the *Jewish Chronicle*, displacing Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.²⁹ The

²⁴ According to a woman who attended these meetings, the Chief Rabbi originally promised the women could use a Torah scroll and meet in the synagogue, before changing his mind: 'he promised us the earth and delivered pizza', Sheila Dorfman, interview.

²⁵ Nicola Perlman claimed they had never wanted to use a Torah scroll as it is much more difficult to read from one, but see Lee, 'Women Await Halachic Ruling', who quotes Doreen Fine, a member of the group, as saying, 'We sincerely believe that the use of a Sefer Torah will enhance and intensify our commitment to Torah, tefilah and mitzvot, as well as providing the spiritual uplift that is so lacking in the society in which we are living.' Linda Stone insisted the original plan had been to use a scroll, and Rabbi Cohen said he would have had no halakhic objection to this, though he did not remember the women asking for one.

²⁶ Nicola Perlman, interview. Rabbi Cohen recalls that about seven minor halakhic objections were presented to him by a panel of rabbis, including three *dayanim* (religious judges), the week after the *Jewish Chronicle* report appeared, but characterized them as 'petty little points'.

²⁷ Rocker, 'Women at Prayer Await Crowning Prize'.

²⁸ See for example, Monchi and Maxted, 'Women Make History'; Rayner, 'Women and Worship'; leader, 'Unanswered Question', *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 Feb. 1993; 'Ben Yitzchok' [pseudonym], 'A Courageous Stand'; leader, 'Women's Day', *Jewish Chronicle*, 5 Mar. 1993; Rothenberg, 'Stammore Women'; Wolfson, 'Fringe Festival'; Sacks, 'Women and Prayer'.

²⁹ "'Ordinary" Women', *Jewish Chronicle*, 10 Sept. 1993.

correspondence pages of the *Chronicle* provide a vivid picture of the heat and controversy generated across the Jewish community.³⁰ The issue was further complicated when another group of women, led by Linda Stone, held a Rosh Hodesh service on a Sunday morning on 13 March 1994 at Yakar, an independent Orthodox study centre and synagogue in Hendon. They used a Torah scroll, without seeking the approval of the Chief Rabbi, and in fact against his express wish.³¹ Even though the service was not publicized by the organizers, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported it,³² setting off yet another storm of correspondence.³³ Although the Yakar group did not continue on a regular basis, the increased opposition it inspired seems to have influenced attitudes to the Stanmore group. In February 1994, a WTG began at Pinner, and it was reported that plans ‘were afoot to create other women’s-only tefilah groups in Edgware, Kenton, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Bristol’;³⁴ of these, only those in Manchester and Leeds³⁵ actually materialized. WTGs were held on an occasional basis in north-west London in later years, but the only groups that lasted were those in Stanmore and Manchester.³⁶

Description

Two more services were held in private homes, with about 100 women attending the second,³⁷ and the women then began to rent a room in a local sheltered housing complex, Oakmead Court, about ten minutes’ walk from the synagogue. Services were limited to a maximum of six a year by the housing complex management; the women themselves raised the rental fee. In July 2011, after repeated requests over a decade and considerable pressure from the wardens of Stanmore Synagogue, the London Beth Din agreed that the WTG might take place on synagogue premises, on condition that its name be changed to the ‘Women’s Learning Experience’ and that it

³⁰ e.g. letters to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 and 19 Feb. 1993, 18 Feb. 1994.

³¹ Monchi, ‘Rebuke from Chief Rabbi’, who reported that the rabbi of Yakar, Mickey Rosen, had supported the women in a public statement.

³² Monchi, ‘Women to Hold Second Service’.

³³ Letters to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 Feb. 1994, 22 and 29 July 1994; see also the leader ‘Politics and Halacha’ in the latter issue.

³⁴ Monchi, ‘“Overwhelming” Turnout’.

³⁵ Anon., ‘Yorkshire’s First Women Only Shabbat Service’.

³⁶ Between 1998 and 2002 my husband, Norm Guthartz, and I organized occasional services in the Stanmore-Edgware area modelled on Kehilat Yedidya in Jerusalem, with separate Torah readings, with scrolls, for men and women. Typical attendance was about 30-50 men and women, mostly from a United Synagogue background. After moving to Hendon in 2002, I helped to organize occasional WTGs in this format at Yakar and its successor congregation, Ohel Avraham, until 2009; they took place on Simhat Torah and a few sabbaths each year, with about 20-30 women attending.

³⁷ Maxted, ‘Sacks Lends Support’.

be held no more than four times a year. By August 2013, the group felt confident enough to announce that ‘we plan to increase to 6 services each year from 2014’, as well as organizing a celebration for the group’s twentieth anniversary.³⁸

In their heyday, these services attracted 40-50 women, with considerably more when a bat mitzvah was celebrated. Because of health and safety regulations, on these occasions the women had to rent space at Aylward School nearby, since about a hundred women might turn up. By the time the group was allowed to use the synagogue in 2011, however, numbers had declined considerably: some members moved to Israel; others were prevented by their health from attending (the founders were mostly in their 50s in 1992, and now had less energy to spare). At a service I attended on 5 March 2011 only 21 women were present. However, once the group was permitted to meet in the synagogue, attendance more than doubled, with over 60 women attending the first service held in the synagogue on 17 September 2011, in a palpable atmosphere of rejuvenation.

I will describe a typical service from the Oakmead Court period, when the group met in the day room of the complex, a large, low-ceilinged room adorned by a portrait of the Queen, containing several dozen low, padded chairs. These were arranged in lines facing the large picture window at the back of the room, which looked onto a pretty garden. A traditional prayer stand (*shtender*) faced the chairs, and was used by the woman leading the prayers or reading the Torah portion. At the other side of the room, behind the chairs, stood long tables with plates of food and small plastic cups containing wine or whisky for *kidush*.³⁹

Each chair bore a photocopied sheet listing the prayers to be recited, with the relevant page numbers.⁴⁰ The women picked up prayerbooks and photocopies of the week’s Torah *parashah* and *haftarah* (prophetic portion) as they entered. Very few wore *sheytls* (wigs);⁴¹ most displayed the elegant hats commonly seen in the United Synagogue, and wore elaborate outfits. Most were in their 60s or 70s, with no young

³⁸ <<http://www.sacps.org.uk/womens-learning-experience.html>> (accessed 1 Aug. 2013).

³⁹ One consequence of gaining access to the synagogue was the loss of the ‘social space’ of the group’s *kidush*, an element that had undoubtedly promoted the group’s sense of identity and cohesion.

⁴⁰ The prayers included were originally decided in consultation with Rabbi Cohen.

⁴¹ These are characteristic of *haredi* women, though sometimes worn by Modern Orthodox women, and rarely by traditionalist women. See Carrel, ‘Hasidic Women’s Head Coverings’.

girls in recent years, though earlier there were a few teenagers, always daughters of attendees.

There was usually some chatting and greeting before the service got under way. The women did not read all the traditional prayers, largely because of time constraints (they read them much more slowly than would be usual in a standard service), but also because many of them find it difficult to read Hebrew.⁴² They included the most important prayers, such as the *shema* and *amidah*,⁴³ and those that can be sung (such as *mah tovu* and *yigdal* at the beginning of the service and *adon olam* at the end); the tunes they used were often those used in Jewish schools rather than those used in the synagogue, and may have been learnt from children or grandchildren.⁴⁴ One woman stood at the front, facing the others, and led the prayers.⁴⁵ The atmosphere was very quiet and focused (the women pride themselves on their ‘decorum’), in contrast to the often noisy and busy atmosphere of most Orthodox synagogues, in which both men and women go in and out, chat, and move around the synagogue. Nor was there the usual buzz of rapidly recited prayer as a constant undertone, characteristic of Orthodox men at prayer—the women read prayers that are not sung, such as the *shema*, in silence.

The ritual surrounding the taking out of the Torah scrolls was omitted, since no scrolls were used, so the Torah reading took place immediately after the *derashah* (sermon), which usually focused on the *parashah*. Even though no scroll was used, the portion was always divided into its usual seven *aliyot* and seven women were ‘called up’ using their Hebrew names. No blessings were said before and after each *aliyah*, as would be done in a standard service, but the appropriate blessings were recited before and after the reading of the *haftarah*, perhaps because even in a standard service this is read from a printed copy.

⁴² Many older women confided, ‘Of course I’m not learned’, describing their complete lack of any formal Jewish education, often because only the boys in their families went to *heder* (traditional religious school), but sometimes because they had been evacuated from London during World War II and had had no formal Jewish education.

⁴³ Since women may not say *kedushah* in the repetition of the *amidah*, the entire repetition was omitted, and the silent *amidah* was concluded by singing *oseh shalom*, the last line of the *amidah*—a practice not found in standard services.

⁴⁴ Women (and indeed most men) do not learn the traditional and complex *nusah* (musical tradition) used in the synagogue. Jewish schools use bouncy, easily learnt tunes for daily prayers, which are a much reduced version of the daily liturgy.

⁴⁵ In a standard service the prayer leader faces the ark, with his back to the congregation.

After the *haftarah*, there were prayers for the sick, when women were invited to come to the reading desk and recite prayers in either Hebrew or English for named individuals, followed by the *hazkarah* prayer, in either Hebrew or English, for deceased relations whose *yortsayt* fell close to the date. In the standard service, both prayers are recited by the prayer leader or the *gabai* (service ‘stage-manager’); they are exclusively in Hebrew, are recited very quickly, and generally include a list of several names (for the sick). *Hazkarot* are usually recited individually after the *aliyah* given to the deceased person’s relative. The women valued the opportunity to pray for sick friends and, especially, to commemorate family members, and saw this as one of the high points of the service.⁴⁶ It was always an emotional moment, often accompanied by tears. Next came the standard prayers for the Queen and for the state of Israel, augmented by two non-standard prayers in English, one for the welfare of women and one for *agunot*;⁴⁷ these provided another opportunity to participate for women who do not feel confident reading Hebrew.

Instead of the ritual of replacing the Torah scrolls in the ark, the passage *ets hayim* from the prayer accompanying the standard ritual was sung, and the service continued with the standard *musaf* service (again replacing the repetition of the *amidah* with *oseh shalom*). The liturgical poem *anim zemirot* was led by a young girl,⁴⁸ and the service concluded with announcements and thanks to the organizers, followed by *kidush*, the blessing over wine accompanied by snacks after the service. Husbands usually turned up for *kidush* and one of them usually recited *kidush* for all present. On special occasions, such as bat mitzvahs, Rabbi Cohen or Elkan Levy would deliver a speech to the bat mitzvah girl at the end of the service, which was much appreciated by the women as a sign of support.

The format of the service has not changed following the move into the synagogue, in spite of the change of name (viewed by all participants as an attempt at saving face by the Beth Din), though there are already signs that the group may begin to evolve further, taking advantage of its new official status and more convenient location. On

⁴⁶ See also Ch. 3, section on ‘Funerals, *kadish*, and *yortsayt*’.

⁴⁷ The prayer for *agunot* was composed by Shelly Frier List in English and is widely used by WTGs in English-speaking communities. See <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/international-coalition-for-agunah-rights-icar>> (accessed 28 July 2011).

⁴⁸ In the standard service boys under 13 lead this poem.

8 December 2012 the group held its first *shabaton* (sabbath programme with special events), with a service including a *devar torah* by Maureen Kendler, a leading educator, a talk after the service by a group member, and a lunch for members and their families.

Significance for the women

Many women feel these services constitute the high point of their religious lives, offering an opportunity for quiet reflection and participation:

Attending the Women's Tefilah Service has given me a great sense of fulfilment. We are there because we want to be there. In a peaceful and spiritual atmosphere we are able to follow the excellent guide through the Service which is a joy.

I feel much more involved spiritually and practically in the Women's Tefilah service than when I'm in the Ladies' gallery in *shul*.⁴⁹

Other important features mentioned by the women include the opportunity for learning more about the service and individual prayers, the sense of active participation, and the opportunity for celebrating events such as births of daughters or granddaughters, bat mitzvahs, and special birthdays. Both the educational value of the WTG and the fact that it had a special significance for single women were noted by Sheila Dorfman, one of the founders:

I think it has an *enormous* place for encouraging young girls to take on *tefilah* [prayer], for women who are not comfortable with *tefilah* to understand how to do it properly, because it was an *amazing* learning experience, both for those of us who were very active in taking the *tefilah*, and also for those people who just came along and for the first time in their life could understand what was going on, and in an atmosphere of hush and reverence that you never get in *shul*. And I think it was amazing for the elder women in the community and other women who were on their own, and always feel like a spare part in *shul* because they don't have a man, to be called up [to the Torah] for them, to *davn* [lead services] for them, to say the special prayers for them, and they could come to this service and do it for themselves, and not feel that they were alien.

⁴⁹ Participants' comments, Lee and Fine, *Women's Tefilah Services*.

The 1994 Preston Report noted that ‘a perception is growing among younger Orthodox women, of the synagogue as a “men’s club”, controlling, inhibiting and unfairly restricting the scope of women’s involvement’.⁵⁰ In this atmosphere, the Stanmore WTG was perceived by those who attended it as a spiritual beacon. Several Orthodox women expressed even more resentment about their lack of participation in synagogue in the follow-up survey from 2009: ‘I no longer want to be a spectator at shul. I would like to be called up [for the Torah reading] when I have *yahrzeit* and to be able to say *kaddish* and *bensch gomel*⁵¹ and to make a third at grace after meals.’⁵²

In spite of these comments, however, not only had the Stanmore WTG declined by 2009, but none of the other attempts at setting up a WTG had survived (except in Manchester), and few women seemed interested in trying to start a group. This decline seems to be associated with the Stanmore group’s marginal position and original lack of endorsement by the United Synagogue establishment.⁵³ The group’s recent move to the synagogue seems to have conferred a degree of official approval: there was a threefold rise in attendance (to 63 women) at the first service held on the synagogue premises, and numbers stayed in the 30s and 40s at subsequent services. Far from being ideologically-driven feminists determined to shake off the shackles of patriarchy, the Stanmore women desperately wanted to keep the group under the auspices of the synagogue and to have the whole-hearted approval of the community, especially its male religious leadership. I asked Nicola Perlman whether it had ever occurred to them to strike out on their own and abandon the attempt to run the WTG as part of the synagogue. She answered:

I want to stay in Orthodoxy but just be recognized. Otherwise there are places we can go and do this type of thing and have an egalitarian service, whatever we want to do. But that wasn’t the aim of the game. ... The aim of the game

⁵⁰ Preston, Goodkin, and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 29.

⁵¹ Yiddish form of *birkat hagomel*, the blessing recited in public after a person survives illness, a dangerous journey, childbirth, or other potentially life-threatening situations. Men recite the blessing in synagogue after being called up to the Torah.

⁵² Preston *et al.*, *Connection, Continuity and Community*, 12. If three adult males or three adult females have eaten a meal including bread together, the grace after meals (*birkat hamazon*) is augmented by a preliminary introduction. Most halakhic authorities would not permit a mixed gender group of three to recite this introduction, and although three women may (indeed, according to some authorities, must) do so, few women are aware of this obligation. See Wolowelsky, ‘Women and *Zimmun*’.

⁵³ ‘I think sadly it’s *because* it’s been banned from the *shul*, and because of all the other restrictions placed on it, it’s fading away’; Sheila Dorfman, interview.

was to have it within Orthodoxy. We were very careful to follow strictly the guidelines they gave.⁵⁴

The desire to remain within the mainstream Orthodox community was stronger than the yearning for personal spiritual fulfilment and participation, and points up the existence of strong ‘traditionalist’ as well as ‘Modern Orthodox’ motivations among the members of the group. Another interviewee spoke bitterly of the fear of change within the United Synagogue, but could not envision abandoning the institution in order to conduct women’s religious activities without external constraints:

It’s just fear, it’s just status quo [...] the United Synagogue has no identity. [...] It’s fearful, it’s introverted, it’s reversionary. [...] it’s lost its way. [...] We women have to take the initiative now, on the cusp of a new president and a new [chief] rabbi, and create facts on the ground, so that we are not just put back into our box and the lid put firmly down when the new president and the new chief rabbi are in place.⁵⁵

For these women, who are on the boundary between Modern Orthodox and traditionalist, to be Orthodox and Jewish means to belong to an established community; they could not envisage Orthodoxy or Judaism outside recognized communal institutions. They are very aware of the high cost of leaving or seeming to leave the Orthodox community.⁵⁶ This also seems to have been the reason that the Stanmore women avoided every association with the WTGs held at Yakar, an independent Orthodox institution that had no links to the United Synagogue or any other Orthodox association of synagogues.⁵⁷ The Yakar WTG did use a Torah scroll and was outspokenly criticized for this not only by those who opposed WTGs in general, but also by many ‘moderates’ who supported the Stanmore group.⁵⁸ It

⁵⁴ Nicola Perlman, interview; see also the epigraph heading this chapter.

⁵⁵ Sheila Dorfman, interview. Lord Jonathan Sacks retired as chief rabbi in September 2013, and was succeeded by Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis. Elections for United Synagogue president and trustees took place in July 2011. The board at this time consisted of the president, three vice-presidents, three treasurers (all male), and four ‘women representatives’;

http://www.theus.org.uk/the_united_synagogue/about_the_us/our_president_and_trustees/

(accessed 24 July 2011). For recent developments in women’s leadership opportunities, see Ch. 3.

⁵⁶ See Reitman, ‘On Exit’, esp. pp. 194-5.

⁵⁷ They refused to distribute flyers advertising the Yakar service; Linda Stone, interview.

⁵⁸ In a phone call to Linda Stone, Rabbi Cohen attempted to persuade the Yakar group organizers not to use a Torah scroll, adding that ‘his goodwill would be dependent on the degree to which they accepted his authority’ and that he ‘strongly cautioned them not to do anything that would make him disassociate himself from the women’s movement’ since ‘he had to satisfy halakhic authorities to the right of him’. Linda Stone, interview, during which she showed me notes she had made during the call.

appears that many Orthodox women, in particular those in the United Synagogue, resent their exclusion from public ritual, but are not prepared to pay the heavy price of leaving the Orthodox community, though they are well aware that many women have already made that choice, or are seeking the certainties of *haredi* ideology.⁵⁹

Thus a major factor inhibiting women's willingness to demand increased participation in ritual or new forms of ritual is the risk this entails of exclusion from the community, or at least of strong disapproval from the Orthodox establishment, and the consequent impact on their own self-identification as Orthodox women. This was reinforced by the religious authorities' 18-year refusal to allow WTGs on synagogue premises, and the existence of competing models of 'approved' women's activities that function within the synagogue, such as ladies' guilds.⁶⁰ Much of the antagonistic reaction to the Stanmore WTG expressed by both men and women in the *Jewish Chronicle's* correspondence pages sought to delegitimize the group by asserting that other female activities exemplified true Orthodoxy, and by associating the women of the WTG with the external, non-Jewish (and thus alien) feminist movement:

It is high time that the women's lobby within the US [United Synagogue] took as its role models our great biblical matriarchs, as well as the many contemporary strictly Orthodox women who find spiritual and intellectual fulfilment in their duties and responsibilities as *n'shei chayil* (women of worth) [...] Torah Judaism [...] transcends secular values, and modern-day feminism has no place in it.⁶¹

A truly observant Jewish woman does not need to seek emancipation through women-only services. She *is* emancipated and, indeed, exerts a decisive influence on the whole of public life. It is she who is entrusted with the building of our homes, with kashrut and *taharah* (purity), and thereby, with the future of our children.⁶²

⁵⁹ See the remarks on polarization by Sheila Dorfman quoted in Ch. 2. For the attractions of *haredi* certainties in an era of rapidly changing and frequently questioned gender roles, see Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World*, 194-5.

⁶⁰ See Ch. 3. The Stanmore synagogue website revealed that activities for women held *on* the synagogue premises included the ladies' guild, a ladies' *shiur*, a *simhah* dancing class, and a Rosh Hodesh group; <<http://www.sacps.org.uk/living-and-learning.html#ladies>> (accessed 24 July 2011). Forbidding the WTG to use the synagogue sent a clear message that this was not an approved activity.

⁶¹ Brian Gordon, letter to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 Feb. 1994.

⁶² S. M. Rubin, letter to the editor, *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Nov. 1992.

The fate of WTGs in Britain sheds considerable light on the communal factors that determine the shape of women's religious lives: even with male and rabbinic support, certain activities, in themselves normative, become controversial and marginal when performed by women. I will consider why this is so, and which activities are vulnerable to community pressures, at the end of this chapter.

2. Women's Megillah Readings

Somewhat less controversial are women's group readings of the Megillah, the biblical book of Esther, that form the central ritual of the minor festival of Purim. The Megillah is read both in the evening and morning of the festival, and both men and women have a halakhic obligation to hear it. In a standard service, the book is read from a handwritten parchment scroll by a man, and men, women, and children listen, waving *gragers* (rattles) and booing to 'erase' the name of the villain, Haman. Purim is a light-hearted, carnival-like occasion, with adults and children dressing up, wearing masks, and engaging in parodies and joking about central rituals and practices. Role reversal is a central theme, which may contribute to the much lower level of controversy associated with women's Megillah readings.

Reading the Megillah demands a high level of skill and considerable investment in practice, since, like Torah scrolls, the Megillah scroll contains neither vowels nor musical notation, which must be memorized. The book is ten chapters long and takes 30-45 minutes to read, and is recited in a unique musical mode. The question of whether women may read the Megillah, either for other women, or for both men and women, has been discussed in both classical and modern halakhic works.⁶³ Several authorities permit this practice (including most of the *rishonim*, or pre-16th-century authorities), while others limit it to women reading for other women, or even to individual women reading it for themselves.

⁶³ Frimer, 'Women's *Megilla* Reading'; a list of modern studies of this question appears in the first footnote. See also Landes, 'Are Women Obligated?'.

History

The first women's Megillah readings took place in the USA⁶⁴ and Israel in the 1970s, roughly at the same time as the first WTGs and in the same circles.⁶⁵ The first in the UK was held in Cambridge around 1991;⁶⁶ most regular readings were founded in the last decade, with the pace increasing from 2010 onwards.⁶⁷

About thirteen women's Megillah readings now take place in the London area every year,⁶⁸ some attached to synagogues,⁶⁹ and others in private houses or rented premises.⁷⁰ Some take place in the evening and others in the morning. In all, several women share the reading, in contrast to standard readings in which one man reads the entire book. The primary reason is practical: women have to learn how to read using the special musical mode, and most find this difficult. The book is therefore divided into its constituent chapters, or smaller units, and women typically memorize the individual passages from tapes. Another reason for dividing the book up is to give more women a chance to participate.

The first women's Megillah reading in London was held at Yakar in 1995, initiated by the rabbi, Simon Harris; over 70 women attended.⁷¹ However, the earliest readings to have continued annually to the present are those at London School of

⁶⁴ Email message from Frida Birnbaum, 24 July 2011: 'I remember women's megillah readings at Lincoln Square Synagogue in the early or mid-1970s.'

⁶⁵ According to Aryeh Frimer, the earliest (modern) responsum permitting women's Megillah readings dates from 1976, by the chief rabbi of Beersheba, Elijah Katz; see Katz, *Ha'eshel (Bite'on Hamo'etsah Hadatit shel Be'er-sheva)*, 13 (Nisan 5736), 41-4, 48. See also Shirah Leibowitz Schmidt, letter to the editor, *Tradition*, 33/2 (1999), 80-2. I am indebted to Prof. Frimer for these references.

⁶⁶ Email from Aviva Kaufman, 27 July 2011.

⁶⁷ Women's readings include: London School of Jewish Studies, Hendon (LSJS) (began in 2000); Hampstead Garden Suburb (2001/2, moved to synagogue in 2013); Edgware (2006); Alei Tziyon (Hendon); Borehamwood (2011); Muswell Hill (2012); Mill Hill (2013); South Hampstead (2013). I participated in several women's Megillah readings (and one highly controversial mixed reading) at Yakar before it closed in 2002, and organized women's readings for Yakar's successor congregation, Yakar Kehilla/Ohel Avraham, which closed in 2010. All readings took place in non-*haredi* contexts.

⁶⁸ The only evidence of women's Megillah readings outside London, except for Cambridge, came from an interview with Rabbi Mordechai Locardo, a Sefardi rabbi, who mentioned he had permitted one for students in Leeds several years previously.

⁶⁹ The readings at Radlett, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Finchley, Mill Hill, South Hampstead, and Brondesbury Park take place in local synagogues; those in Edgware and at LSJS are held at non-synagogal Jewish institutions.

⁷⁰ These do not include the 'women's readings' at which a man reads for a group of women; these are usually held to enable women caring for small children to fulfil their own obligation of hearing the Megillah, after their husbands have already heard it and can look after the children.

⁷¹ Anon., 'Women Read Megilah'.

Jewish Studies and Radlett United Synagogue. Stella James started the latter group in 2001:

I wanted something that we could do, that we could participate in. I hate just being an observer, if I could *davn* [lead prayers] and *leyen* I would, I'd *love* to ... now having learnt to *leyen* Megillah I absolutely *love* doing it, it just means *so* much more if I can participate rather than just stand and watch.

An American woman made tapes so that women could learn,⁷² and helped to organize the reading, usually shared between 19-23 women. The rabbi was very supportive,⁷³ and there was no opposition from the community, though the London Beth Din were not enthusiastic.⁷⁴ Over a hundred women attended the first reading, and about 80 turn up nowadays.⁷⁵

In 2006, another reading was started in Edgware, largely on the initiative of two women who regularly attended morning readings by women in Hendon and Radlett, but had had 'awful experiences' at evening readings in their own synagogues.⁷⁶ Jewish law prescribes that every word of the Megillah should be heard, and if this is impossible, one should attend another reading in order to fulfil one's halakhic obligation; one woman described the standard reading in Edgware United Synagogue as largely inaudible, for both men and women, and felt compelled to seek another reading afterwards to fulfil her obligation.⁷⁷ Before the first women's reading, the organizers were summoned by two local *haredi* rabbis and told to cancel the event, on the grounds that 'it would open a Pandora's box' and that they would 'destroy the unity of Edgware'. The rabbis acknowledged that they could find no halakhic objections. Nevertheless, the reading went ahead, with about 20 women attending, five of whom served as readers. In 2011, about 25 women attended, with seven

⁷² Significantly, she had grown up in a Conservative family and trained as a *hazanit* (female cantor), a role not available in the Orthodox world.

⁷³ Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, telephone conversation, 24 Aug. 2011. He felt that the popularity of the reading showed how positive it was; at the first reading, over 100 women came, in contrast to the two or three women who had attended the standard morning reading in previous years.

⁷⁴ 'There was a difficulty with the Beth Din, because they weren't that keen on it happening in the *shul*', Stella James, interview.

⁷⁵ Stella James, interview.

⁷⁶ Edgware: email (28 July 2011) and telephone (1 Aug. 2011) communications with Brenda Johns.

⁷⁷ The second reading was very fast, taking about 20 minutes, and was not a pleasant or meaningful experience for her (Brenda Johns, interview).

reading. Most were in their 30s. One organizer spoke of the reading as ‘the highlight’ of Purim, and noted that women tend to return year after year.

Another recent women’s Megillah reading started in 2011 at Borehamwood United Synagogue,⁷⁸ initiated by a woman who put a notice in the synagogue newsletter asking if any other women were interested. The rabbi gave his permission and support, and taught the women the relevant halakhic rules. The reading took place at the synagogue, in a hall used as a nursery; the organizers had expected about 30 women to turn up, and were delighted when about 65 arrived, with a wide age range. Eleven women read, and the event was very successful. There was little opposition within the community; some women were against the idea, while a few men were annoyed that they had to take their children to the special children’s reading scheduled at the same time, and there were some concerns about ‘splitting the community’.

In almost all cases, readings were initiated by a woman or a small group of women, with or without rabbinic support; actual opposition was only encountered from *haredi* rabbis, which the Modern Orthodox women they spoke to chose to ignore. It is significant that no *haredi* women have set up Megillah groups.

Description

The reading at London School of Jewish Studies takes place in the morning, usually around 10 a.m., and is attended by 60-80 women and children.⁷⁹ Many women, and all the children, wear Purim costumes, and bring the traditional *gragers* and rattles. A tall reading table, draped in a red and gold sari, with a *talit* spread on top, holds the Megillah, which is unwound and folded ‘like a letter’, according to tradition, before the reading begins. The atmosphere is full of excitement, and the room is packed to overflowing. There is usually a different reader for each chapter; the woman who reads the first chapter also reads the opening and concluding blessings. A few announcements are made, silence falls, and the opening blessing is made, for which everyone stands. There is a brief pause as they sit down, and the reading begins, with

⁷⁸ Borehamwood: email from Miriam Lorie, one of the organizers, 4 Aug. 2011.

⁷⁹ At first this was unaffiliated, but it became an official LSJS activity in 2012. I have attended and read at this reading since its inception; see also the vignette at the beginning of Ch. 1.

two women flanking the reader at the table, correcting or prompting her if necessary. The speed and fluency of reading vary from reader to reader, but are generally slower than usual at a standard reading. Because of this, and because the listening women are completely focused and silent, it is a remarkably clear and distinct reading, with every word audible—something that can be difficult to achieve in large synagogues, where not everyone is aware of the halakhic necessity of hearing every word. This is one reason many women cite for their preference for a women’s reading. The readers pause at the four verses which are traditionally recited first by the entire congregation, and all present read them aloud quietly; the noise made ‘to blot out Haman’s name’ is more subdued than at a standard reading, and stops rapidly in order to allow the reader to continue (something that is by no means standard in United Synagogue readings). After the final blessing, for which everyone stands, a couple of traditional songs are sung, and one of the organizers thanks the readers, and reminds the women that if anyone would like to learn how to read for the next year, they can do so. The gathering ends in an cheerful and excited atmosphere of greetings, general chat, and the exchange of *mishlo’ah manot* (Purim gifts of food) between acquaintances.

Significance for women

Several women reported their frustration at standard readings which were often noisy and crowded, making it difficult if not impossible to hear the Megillah. They found the women’s reading far more meaningful, noting that as it was slower, there was no sense ‘of arrogance, of “look how fast I can do this”’.⁸⁰ Brenda Johns, a young Modern Orthodox mother of three, noted that she found the reading ‘transformative’, with every word being meaningful and the women reading ‘with lots of expression’: ‘It’s wonderful to hear the women’s voices reading the women’s story ... I feel really connected to ‘my’ chapter.’

Stella James emphasized not only the personal but also the communal joy and empowerment women feel:

It’s also a *wonderful* experience for the women, a lot of women [...] don’t like saying things in public, speaking in public let alone singing in public.

⁸⁰ Brenda Johns, interview.

Some of them have been very tentative about it, but it's been a *huge* leap for them [...] to learn how to do it [...] their Hebrew's not been that good, let alone learn how to *leyen* it, sing a *trop* [traditional chant], all that sort of thing ... and then to have to get up in front of a load of other women and do it, and when they do, there is such a sort of sisterhood [...] there's just such a spirit among everyone, and the women in the congregation *love* it, they think that it has a very different *quality* to it, the nature of the reading's very different, it's very quiet, and they can hear every word. It's very beautiful, and that's not necessarily because of the singing, because some people have got lovely voices, others have kind of got Rex Harrison *My Fair Lady*-type growly voices, and they say it, growl it rather than singing it, it's all part of the rich tapestry, it's lovely.

The satisfaction and sense of achievement gained from mastering an unfamiliar traditional technique and the consequent sense of ownership and connection are very important to the women. Opposition on the part of other women seems to be the result of a fear of changing tradition: 'There are still some women who are against it on principle, that they don't see that women should be doing such things.'⁸¹ A few *haredi* women attend women's Megillah readings. Those who do not may be unaware of the existence of such readings, or may have asked the opinion of their rabbis, who tell them that they are forbidden; or they may fear that the quality will be too low for them to fulfil their halakhic obligation of hearing each word properly pronounced.⁸²

As with WTGs, Megillah readings answer women's desire to participate, to 'own' or 'perform' the tradition rather than always being spectators. They also allow women to act together as a religious community. In contrast to WTGs, however, more groups of this type exist, with less opposition to them. A number of factors explain this:

- Megillah readings occur once a year, so are both less prominent and involve less organization
- Women have a halakhic obligation to hear the Megillah, so there is less halakhic basis for opposition, and more support in halakhic literature
- The Megillah story itself focuses on Esther, and the presence of a female heroine makes this a text with particular resonance for women

⁸¹ Stella James, interview.

⁸² Brenda Johns, interview.

All the London groups were initiated by women, often in response to a sense that they could not fulfil their halakhic obligation in a standard service; several enjoy strong support from their community rabbi.⁸³ Because there are two Megillah readings on Purim, women can schedule their attendance at a women's Megillah reading either in the evening or in the morning, at a time when their husbands are not attending the standard reading and can look after children. A few girls have celebrated their bat mitzvah by participating in a women's Megillah reading, thus creating an approximate parallel to the traditional Torah or *haftarah* reading by bar mitzvah boys.

Although it takes time and effort to learn to chant the Megillah, it demands less investment than does preparing Torah reading for a WTG, in which the text will be different each time. Since the Megillah text does not vary, one factor in its somewhat wider popularity seems to be the greater 'return' on the initial learning process.

Given the existence not only of specific references to women reading the Megillah in early halakhic literature but of approval of this by several early authorities,⁸⁴ it is much more difficult for those who object to find halakhic grounds to ban the practice. When rabbis do voice objections, it is usually on 'community' or 'policy' grounds, as in the case of the Edgware reading. However, the London Beth Din has not yet acted to discourage the readings in the same way as the Stanmore WTG, so there is less overt disapproval on the part of the establishment, which allows women to feel that they can participate in these events without risking their position or status in the community. Perhaps partly as a result of the success of women's Megillah groups, the other biblical books linked to festivals are becoming the focus of similar groups. Two bat mitzvah girls have recently read the book of Ruth on Shavuot,⁸⁵ and in summer 2014, a group of women organized a reading of Eikhah (Lamentations) on the fast of Tisha Be'av. There are even fewer possible halakhic objections to women reading these scrolls, so it seems likely that this practice will spread.

⁸³ The rabbis involved were young and Modern Orthodox rather than *haredi*.

⁸⁴ This is in contrast to WTGs and the practice of women reading from the Torah, which are barely mentioned in premodern halakhic literature, though the latter was a feature of Shabateanism that outraged contemporaries; see Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy*, 137-8, 140, 259.

⁸⁵ See Ch. 3.

3. Rosh Hodesh groups

As described in Chapter 2, the introduction of Rosh Hodesh groups to Britain set off a wave of women's activity in the early 1990s. Though Rosh Hodesh had been associated with women from the rabbinic period onwards, it gained a new lease of life in the 1970s and 1980s when American Jewish women inspired by feminist ideals sought to reclaim and reconstruct it as a monthly women's space for ritual activity and discussion.⁸⁶

Rosh Hodesh groups were brought to Britain by the Israeli educator Dr Alice Shalvi. A young teacher, Sharon Jastrow, had been invited to a fundraising event intended to raise money for Shalvi's new Jerusalem girls' school, Pelech, at which a letter from Shalvi to British Jewish women in advance of a planned visit was read out. Jastrow remembers:

[The letter] said 'Now when I come to London it will be Rosh Hodesh, and there is a custom for women to celebrate Rosh Hodesh, and there are a number of things you can do.' And she gave a list of what one does, and so one [thing] is light a candle, another give *tsedakah* [charity], wear a new outfit, [eat a new] fruit, study, meditate, yoga, she gave a list, eat, whatever. So everyone said, 'We don't do that, we're British!' you know, yoga and meditation, and then I said 'I'll organize something.' And that was quite significant because I felt I had nothing to offer this group, I wasn't a fundraiser, I wasn't smart like one of them, but here I knew I could do something. I'd never ever met Alice, so the first evening I just invited whoever I knew.

Rosh Hodesh groups offered empowerment for Jewish women, who could finally 'do something'. Jastrow organized a Rosh Hodesh evening in Finchley at which Shalvi spoke, inspiring the women to set up regular Rosh Hodesh meetings in private homes: 'this was before Limmud⁸⁷ was really established in Anglo-Jewry, and it was the first time women could meet cross-communally'. The first group met in Finchley, but groups soon started in Pinner and Edgware, and outside London. There was a palpable sense of excitement, and the first group members were passionately committed. Linda Stone started the Edgware group after attending the original Finchley one:

⁸⁶ See Berrin (ed.), *Celebrating the New Moon* and Adelman, *Miriam's Well*.

⁸⁷ See Ch. 2.

The Rosh Hodesh movement is definitely a spinoff of the second wave of women's liberation, those [Rosh Hodesh] groups that were set up in America and in Israel came out of that feeling of women meeting together, the consciousness-raising groups that I wasn't a part of. And it took a while for it to filter to the [other] Jewish communities. And by the [late] 80s, this consciousness of women and Rosh Hodesh [as] significant for women, and having a space for women all really kind of exploded. [...] I was someone with a very small child who was isolated, wondering why I didn't fit into the *shul* that was an old boys' network, and there wasn't a place for me. [...] So I started to get involved in the Rosh Hodesh movement, and got very involved.

The creation of a women's space where issues central to women could be discussed galvanized many women into action: Linda Stone was involved in both the Stanmore and the more controversial Yakar women's *tefilah* groups, was active in the campaign for *agunot*, co-founded the cross-communal Jewish Women's Network in 1993,⁸⁸ and established a fund to buy a Torah scroll for the Jewish women of Britain.⁸⁹ The activities pursued by the groups varied widely; Sally Berkovic, reviewing the Rosh Hodesh movement in 1997, recorded:

each group is free to develop its own ceremonies and set of rituals as there are no prescribed formulas. I have attended groups which start with passing a burning candle to each person, who speaks about something important that has happened in the previous month, and groups that start with coffee and cake. Some groups form as a branch of the local synagogue, some have no affiliation, some are geared to a particular age-group, some purposely try to be cross-generational. Activities can focus on a Jewish holiday happening that month, a guest speaker, someone's experience or a creative activity.⁹⁰

Many early groups incorporated a ritual element, often focusing on the moon as a specifically female symbol. Sheila Dorfman, who founded the Pinner group, remembered 'in the early days quite a few groups used to light a tealight in a bowl of water, to represent the moon [...] all of the groups tend to have some sort of food ritual, either they have a food relating to the month or they have moon-shaped food, or something to do with food which becomes quite a ritual in their group.' Rosh

⁸⁸ The JWN produced a newsletter and held several debates, study sessions, and workshops, attracting hundreds of women, but seems to have run out of steam after a triple event in 2006, the last event advertised on the website (<<http://www.jwn.org.uk/>>, accessed 8 July 2014).

⁸⁹ It amassed about £800 (Torah scrolls cost several thousand pounds) but was eventually closed in the early 2000s.

⁹⁰ Berkovic, *Under My Hat*, 178.

Hodesh groups were even founded at some Jewish schools, spurring an interesting reaction from the boys:

When we had [a Rosh Hodesh group] at Sinai [school], two of the boys tried to gatecrash in girls' PE skirts, because they felt very very excluded, and I found that fascinating because they didn't realize at all how girls feel excluded from their *leyening* clubs and their *anim zemirot* clubs and everything else that *they're* allowed to do, but once we did something just for the girls, they felt excluded.⁹¹

The highlight of the Rosh Hodesh movement was the two *shabatonim* organized in Bournemouth in 1991 and 1992, which not only included intense programmes of study and discussion, but also women-only sabbath services at which women *leyened* from a Torah scroll. For almost all the women, this was the first time they had ever handled a Torah scroll, and many found the experience both liberating and deeply emotional. Alice Shalvi spoke at both *shabatonim*, and Dr Debbie Weissman, an American-born Orthodox feminist educator from Jerusalem, was invited to speak at the second by Sharon Jastrow. These events are still recalled with excitement and awe by those who were involved.⁹² Shortly afterwards one of the women organized a women-only service as a bat mitzvah celebration for her daughter, at which Katherine Marks had her first, rather overwhelming, experience of being called up to the Torah:

I was very nervous, and I realized that I'd been going to *shul*—that classic moment—all my life, and by that time was well established as a Jewish educator, and I didn't know what to do. Of course I knew the words, but I didn't know where to touch the *sefer* [scroll], I was terribly nervous, and had to be helped a little bit. And this was videoed, and people watched the video afterwards, I also saw it, and people were laughing, I mean in a nice way, with me, but they said I looked wide-eyed with nerves and shock, and I felt it was just such an absolutely weird and peculiar thing to do. It was wonderful, but not at the time, you know, afterwards I was so glad I did it, and I'm still glad I did it.

The shock of transformation from a spectator, unaware of technical details of ritual because of the absence of the possibility of personal involvement, to an active participant, who suddenly realizes that ritual involves previously invisible skills, is

⁹¹ Sheila Dorfman, interview.

⁹² See Ch. 2.

perhaps the central experience of Orthodox women who achieve greater participation in core Jewish rituals.

The publication of the Preston Report in 1994 intensified the feeling that at last Orthodox women had found their voice, but within a few years many of the initiatives inspired by the Rosh Hodesh movement petered out, apparently as a result of rabbinic and lay opposition and most Orthodox women's reluctance to defy rabbinic authority and risk the very real discomfort attendant upon undertaking new ritual practice. The nature of the Rosh Hodesh groups themselves gradually changed; some faded away, while others became more general in tone and less concerned with women's issues, losing their explicitly feminist character. Sheila Dorfman noted:

The Pinner group has undergone several metamorphoses, it started off as a straight Rosh Hodesh group, then it kind of died, then it was relaunched, and then we relaunched it as a sort of more fun group called 'Calendar Girls', and that had its own lifespan, and died. [...] The people who ran 'Calendar Girls' didn't want intensive Jewish education, they wanted the fun bit of Judaism, and we showed some Jewish films, and we had strawberry teas, and so it was a lot more cultural and social than intensive education, but with a Jewish heart and a Jewish theme.

Ultimately a feminist agenda of radical cultural change was swamped by a nervous retreat to 'fun' and conformity to community expectations. Rosh Hodesh groups still exist, often associated with synagogues, but they have lost both their ritual and their radical character, as well as their cross-communal nature. Many of the women who founded and participated in the early groups have left Orthodoxy, or have lost interest in religious participation, often as a result of feeling that their efforts had borne no fruit. Asked whether she thought her activities during the heyday of the Rosh Hodesh movement had left any legacy, Linda Stone felt they had had no real effect:

Everybody told me [that] I made a big difference, 'you've done this and that', but actually I just think it shows how impenetrable it is. [...] I think it's because women are disenfranchised within Orthodoxy, if you have always got to ask permission from a man before anything can change, why

shouldn't they say no? [...] I don't think there's any progress within Orthodoxy, I haven't seen any.⁹³

Current Rosh Hodesh groups tend to follow the format of a talk on a topic of general or Jewish interest, followed by refreshments. A group founded in Edgware in 2009 by a graduate of the Bradfield Women Educators programme, for instance, meets in private homes, either on the sabbath nearest Rosh Hodesh or midweek, and attracts about 20 women, young and middle-aged, with speakers from the group and outside. Recent talks included 'a couple of Jewish book reviews; medical talks with a Jewish component; Lilith plus ghosts, etc., Hanukah, and a talk on "Honour your Father and Mother: How about Foster Parents?"'.⁹⁴ If the meeting is not on the sabbath, each attendee contributes £1 for charity, and each meeting ends with time for refreshments and chat.⁹⁵

Ironically, the concept of Rosh Hodesh groups for women has been adapted and recoded—indeed tamed—by the Orthodox establishment and the *haredi* world. At Mill Hill United Synagogue, the rabbi organized a women's group bearing this name, to whom he lectured on subjects he considered appropriate.⁹⁶ A *haredi* 'Rosh Hodesh Society', part of a Habad outreach programme, is described as 'a sisterhood dedicated to inspiring and empowering Jewish women through monthly cultural learning experiences', but turns out to be a series of seven self-help lectures on 'kabbalistic insights for taking charge of your life', while at Kinloss (Finchley) United Synagogue, a 2013 event entitled 'Lunar: A Monthly Learning Event for Kinloss Women', explicitly scheduled for Rosh Hodesh, was actually an educational event about Purim, with lectures by the synagogue's female community educator and a rabbi.

The Rosh Hodesh movement in Britain was started and embraced by non-*haredi* women who had been brought up in traditional households, but wanted greater participation in Jewish ritual and worship, more Jewish knowledge, and greater

⁹³ Stone no longer considers herself Orthodox or religious. Of the other three women involved in the Rosh Hodesh movement whom I interviewed, one belongs to the Masorti movement, and two remain within Orthodoxy, though frustrated with the lack of change.

⁹⁴ Diane Sheer, telephone conversation, 2 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁵ Money cannot be handled on the sabbath.

⁹⁶ Linda Stone, interview.

spiritual satisfaction. It was explicitly feminist, drawing on Jewish models from the USA and including elements of both consciousness-raising and action, which made it deeply threatening to the rabbinic establishment and indeed to many Orthodox men; one of my interviewees curtailed her activities as a result of her husband's disapproval and unease with her very public profile. The fact that non-Orthodox women participated was also a source of alarm for the Orthodox establishment, which has generally ignored (and sometimes demonized) non-Orthodox denominations. Many traditionalist women found the movement's activities threatening to their own sense of identity, since they so clearly aimed at restructuring Jewish women's traditional roles in synagogue and the wider community, and they often countered the activists' proposals by insisting on the maintenance of 'authentic', traditional roles for women. Ultimately, this attempt to reshape the role of Orthodox women foundered on resistance from traditionalist laymen and women, and largely *haredi* rabbinic authority. Although it has left little obvious legacy (though two of the women's *tefilah* groups it inspired have survived), it is of considerable significance as an example of the wider feminist movement's influence on the Orthodox world; as illustrating the possibilities for creative religious action and agency by women; and as an example of the way in which such action and agency in Orthodoxy is vulnerable to resistance, condemnation, and subversion by the male establishment, supported by traditionalist women who see such action as a threat to their own ethnic/identitarian-based religious role. While it had little or no impact on *haredi* women, the Rosh Hodesh movement pointed up the differences between Modern Orthodox and traditionalist women.

Having examined several women's rituals that create separate sacred spaces for women, where their voices can be heard and their concerns highlighted, including their desire for increased spiritual practice, I now turn to communal rituals and practices designed to nurture, support, and assist the community as a whole.

Nurturing the community

4. Berakhah parties

A very different type of women's communal ritual has developed in the last decade. *Berakhah* ('blessing') parties, also known, particularly in Israel, as 'Amen parties'

(Hebrew: *se'udat amen*), seem to have developed in Israel in the early twenty-first century, but as they are so new little research has yet been carried out on them, and their origins remain obscure. They seem to have started as children's educational events, to teach them the blessings for different types of food, and they still exist in this form alongside the specifically women's version; another predecessor seems to be the Sefardi custom of men reciting blessings over different types of food on the sabbath, often as part of the third sabbath meal (*se'udah shelishit*) held at synagogue after *minhah* (afternoon service).⁹⁷ At some point, however, groups of women began to assemble in order to say the blessings over five types of food, responding to each blessing with a fervent 'Amen', and each blessing became associated with a particular *segulah* (e.g. the blessing over baked goods (*bore minei mezonot*) was linked to *parnasah*, 'livelihood'). From Israel the practice spread to the United States.

The *berakhah* party that takes place on a regular basis in London was founded by three women, at least one of whom is Israeli;⁹⁸ individuals have also held them in their own homes, on a one-off basis or more regularly, with the event publicized among friends or in community newsletters and email lists. Most London Jews are unfamiliar with the practice,⁹⁹ but knowledge of it is gradually spreading, as it is in both Israel and the United States.¹⁰⁰

History

One of the few sources that discusses the ritual's origins is a work of popular piety, *Just One Word: Amen*, by Esther Stern, published in 2005.¹⁰¹ It consists of anecdotes

⁹⁷ I am indebted to Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum for this information. Other influences, such as the kabbalistic *seder* for the minor festival of Tu B'shevat, when foods of different types are eaten in a particular, symbolic order, may also have shaped its development.

⁹⁸ R. Mordechai Locardo, interview.

⁹⁹ Neither of the two women I interviewed from the hasidic community had heard of them; nor had most of the United Synagogue women I talked to. Of five or so rabbis to whom I spoke, only the rabbi from the synagogue where the *berakhah* party was held knew of this practice, describing it as 'a semi institution—it's not an old custom' (Rabbi Locardo, interview).

¹⁰⁰ A brief survey of Orthodox women's websites, such as Imamother (<www.imamother.com/forum/portal.php>, accessed 26 June 2011), revealed that the concept was still unfamiliar to many American Jewish women in 2004 and even later, with frequent requests to explain the term. An article written to describe a *berakhah* party at a girls' seminary in Israel in 2008 noted that 'Having never heard of a *Seudat Amen*, most girls wore confused looks on their faces as they entered the classroom'; <<http://www.shaalvim.org/sfw/shiurim/view.asp?id=602>> (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).

¹⁰¹ See Chen, 'The Amen Chorus'.

and stories that highlight the spiritual power of responding ‘Amen’ to prayers and blessings, a concept that can be traced to rabbinic sources.¹⁰² The book goes well beyond the classical sources, however, in assigning a miraculous effect to the enthusiastic utterance of ‘Amen’.¹⁰³ The book’s last section deals with ‘brachos parties’ and provides an origin story. According to this, Rabbi Avraham Kessler, author of the book *Notrei amen* (‘Guardians of Amen’) on the importance of saying ‘Amen’, gathered 20 boys in his home on a sabbath afternoon and led them through the sequence of blessings over the five food types.¹⁰⁴ A 2007 article locates Rabbi Kessler in Benei Berak in the 1970s and claims that this original party was in response to the deaths of two children in the building where he lived.¹⁰⁵ At this stage there seems to have been no link to the *segulot*. Stern’s book describes how a young woman called ‘Gitti’ witnessed this party and decided to transfer it to a girls’ summer camp in Benei Berak, and how those present spontaneously linked *segulot* to each blessing.¹⁰⁶ Chen’s 2007 article, however, names a Tovi Tzeitlin Baron as responsible, rather than ‘Gitti’, and mentions two other women who encouraged others to imitate the practice: Sarah Meisels and Esther Stern, the author of the *Amen* book. Another article, also written in 2007,¹⁰⁷ traces the practice to the death of Rebetsn Sarah Meisels’ daughter, Alte Nechama Wachsman, in an accident in 2001; in response to the tragedy, Rebetsn Meisels, with the approval of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky of Benei Berak, formed a group of women who met early in the morning to respond ‘Amen’ to each other’s recital of the Dawn Blessings (*birkhot hashahar*),¹⁰⁸ a variant of the ritual that has not become as popular as the ‘party’ version.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Two talmudic statements note that the letters of *amen* stand for *el melekh ne’eman*, ‘God, faithful king’ (BT *Shab.* 119b, *San.* 111a); ‘Resh Lakish said: He who answers “Amen” with all his strength, they open the gates of paradise for him’ (BT *Shab.* 119b). Cf. another evaluation of the importance of saying ‘Amen’ in BT *Ber.* 53b: ‘he who says the blessing is more quickly [rewarded] than he who answers “Amen”’.

¹⁰³ See Mansour, ‘The Importance of Saying Amen’.

¹⁰⁴ Stern, *Just One Word*, 176-8. Halakhically, if one wishes to consume food from these five groups (baked goods, wine, tree fruit, vegetables and ground-grown fruit, other foods), one should make the appropriate blessings and eat the foods in this order.

¹⁰⁵ Chen, ‘The Amen Chorus’.

¹⁰⁶ Stern, *Just One Word*, 178-81.

¹⁰⁷ Hammer, ‘The Amen Phenomenon’.

¹⁰⁸ The Dawn Blessings form the first section of *shaharit*, morning prayers; see *Daily Prayer Book* (ed. J. Sacks), 16-24.

¹⁰⁹ Unsurprisingly, since it would necessitate women leaving their homes and congregating early in the morning, just when they would be getting children ready for school.

The London *berakhah* party was initiated by three women, who, after conducting a few parties in their own homes, went with a dozen other women to the rabbi of the local Sefardi synagogue and asked him whether they could hold the ritual in the synagogue; they also invited him to speak at it. He was happy to accommodate them, and the parties began to be held in the synagogue in about 2006.¹¹⁰

Description

The *berakhah* party, held in Hendon, takes place in the women's section of a Sefardi synagogue, generally on Rosh Hodesh or the nearest convenient day.¹¹¹ Long trestle tables are arranged in a U shape, covered with tablecloths protected by clear plastic, on which stand paper plates, small plastic *kidush* cups containing grape juice, paper napkins, bowls of crisps, plates of fruit, vegetables, cake, and sweets, and bottles of fruit juice and fizzy drinks. At the top of the U stands a small table and a couple of green armchairs, reserved for the rabbis, and another table bears covered bowls of dough, brought by some participants in order to perform the commandment of separating *halah*.¹¹² The Israeli organizer and a few volunteers are responsible for the preparations. Although the party is advertised to start at 8 p.m., the women drift in slowly, and things only get going after 40 minutes. On a low bookcase lie paper sheets, headed in Hebrew with 'Partners', 'Healing', 'Livelihood', 'Children';¹¹³ those who want the rabbi to pray for particular individuals who need help in these areas write down their Hebrew names.

Eventually the women settle at the tables; they range from teenagers to women in their 60s, and are of varying degrees of religious observance.¹¹⁴ Numbers vary between 35 and 50, and seem to be composed of roughly equal numbers of Sefardi

¹¹⁰ Rabbi Locardo, interview.

¹¹¹ I attended some seven *berakhah* parties at this synagogue, starting on 7 Oct. 2010. I also went to a small one regularly held in a private house in Edgware which seems to be a 'spin-off' of the Hendon one; about 8 people were present, and the homeowner, a Sefardi rabbi, conducted the proceedings. See also the vignette at the beginning of Ch. 1.

¹¹² See Ch. 1 n. 15.

¹¹³ Respectively *zivug*, *refuah*, *parnasah*, *yeladim*, the first four of the *segulot* associated with the blessings.

¹¹⁴ Several women wore *sheytls*, and others covered their hair with hats or kerchiefs, but there were also several older women with uncovered hair and occasionally women who wore trousers, forbidden for women in *haredi* circles and discouraged in synagogue contexts in the non-*haredi* community.

and Ashkenazi women.¹¹⁵ Many are Israeli. Friends often sit together, and the entire evening proceeds against a background of conversation in Hebrew and English, texting, and mobile phone calls; when the noise gets too loud, the organizer stands up and reminds the women, ‘Ladies! We want to hear the *berakhot!*’ The atmosphere is relaxed and informal, and women often interrupt the rabbis’ mini-sermons with comments, corrections, and questions, as well as frequent exclamations of wonder and pious ejaculations at the culmination of miracle stories.

There are five ‘rounds’ of blessings, with an occasional extra one at the end: the ritual starts with the synagogue’s rabbi (or the organizer if he is not present) making the *mezonot* blessing over baked goods, followed by all the women, each of whom in turn picks up a biscuit and recites the blessing, answered with an enthusiastic ‘Amen!’ by all the other women. Each round can take fifteen or more minutes, with delays when latecomers arrive and catch up on their blessings. The second round is the blessing over wine, the third that over tree fruit, the fourth over vegetables and fruit that grows on plants, and the fifth the ‘all-purpose’ *shehakol* blessing, recited over anything not covered by the previous blessings (in this context, usually sweets). Sometimes an extra round of blessings, recited before smelling aromatic plants, is added. The organizer usually reminds the women of the associated *segulah* for each blessing at the beginning of the round. The blessings are correlated with *segulot* as follows:¹¹⁶

Table 4.1: Blessings recited over food

Blessing	Translation	Said over:	Associated <i>segulah</i>
<i>bore minei mezonot</i>	Who creates varieties of nourishment	Baked goods	<i>parnasah</i> – livelihood
<i>bore peri hagefen</i>	Who creates the fruit of the vine	Wine	<i>zivug</i> – finding one’s match
<i>bore peri ha’ets</i>	Who creates the fruit of the tree	Tree fruit	<i>yeladim</i> – fertility (cont’d)

¹¹⁵ Sefardim customarily recite *barukh hu uvarukh shemo* (‘blessed is He, and blessed is His Name’) in response to the first part of a blessing, and also recite a version of the *shehakol* blessing that differs from the Ashkenazi formula (*niheyah* instead of *niheyeh*), enabling me to estimate relative numbers.

¹¹⁶ Every blessing starts with the formula: *Barukh atah hashem elokeinu melekh ha’olam ...*, ‘Blessed are You, Lord, our God, king of the universe ...’.

<i>bore peri ha'adamah</i>	Who creates the fruit of the earth	Vegetables, fruit that grows on bushes, etc.	<i>refuah</i> – healing
<i>shehakol niheyeh bidevaro</i>	By whose word everything came into being	Fish, meat, milk, dairy products, etc.—anything not covered by other blessings	any request
[<i>bore atsei vesamim</i>]	[Who creates fragrant trees]	[Fragrant trees or shrubs]	[<i>ilui neshamah</i> – elevation of the soul]

Most women recite the blessings quietly and quickly, but occasionally a woman stands up and announces that she is reciting the blessing to benefit a particular person (or list of people), particularly during the round for healing; sometimes she will add an extempore prayer for the safety of ‘all the [Israeli] soldiers’, or ‘all of *am yisra'el* [the Jewish people]’. The other women respond to these personal interjections with even more enthusiastic ‘Amens’. The rabbi ends each round by reciting a prayer in Hebrew that emphasizes the associated *segulah*.

Between rounds, the rabbi or a guest speaker delivers a short talk;¹¹⁷ it often refers to the weekly Torah portion or the next festival, and is inspirational in character. Miracle stories of cures or of apparent setbacks that end in unexpected rescues or opportunities to perform a commandment are frequent, and often elicit gasps of wonder or cries of *barukh hashem!* (‘Blessed be God!’) from the women. Current affairs are also woven in, particularly anything to do with Israel. Common themes include the power of blessings to bring protection and ‘pierce the heavens’, the power of prayer, and the need to acknowledge everyday miracles, as well as the superiority and spiritual nature of the Jewish people. Instances of improvement in the health of those prayed for are frequently reported by the rabbi or the women, and are attributed to the effect of the parties.

The rabbi often leaves for other duties before the end of the party (which can last three hours) or arrives late; his presence is not essential, though in his absence the

¹¹⁷ So far I have only heard one female guest speaker, whose talk was unusual in that she cited precise sources, spoke from prepared notes, and had clearly structured her talk with care. All other speakers (except for a visiting rabbi from Argentina) were local rabbis who spoke off the cuff. The synagogue rabbi organizes the speakers.

women do not recite the prayer at the end of each round.¹¹⁸ Nor are they particularly interested in reciting the final blessing over food at the end of the evening, and many leave without doing so.¹¹⁹ A range of optional activities may be performed between blessing rounds during the party: these include the *halah* ritual, performed by a few women, who often recite a list of names of those in whose merit they are performing this commandment; the recital of the *nishmat* prayer;¹²⁰ a telephone call to a former attendee suffering from cancer, to allow her to join in the recital of blessings; a telephone call to the tomb of Benjamin in Israel in order to receive a blessing;¹²¹ or an opportunity to donate money, either to an institution represented by a guest speaker or to individuals who enter and request money.¹²²

Significance for the women

The *berakhah* party serves many purposes, both religious and social. Many women come every month, while others attend occasionally; since no learning or preparation is involved, it attracts a wide range of women who feel comfortable in this relaxed, convivial atmosphere that also gives them a sense of spiritual empowerment and practical achievement. Many of the women believe that the parties help others in palpable and physical ways. The advertisement for the parties on the local Jewish email list claims ‘We have seen many *yeshuot* [salvific events] from these events and hope to hear many more’; one young woman told me that ‘the rabbi just got a message to say someone got good test results’ and attributed this directly to the party.

¹¹⁸ The rabbi told me there would be no problem with the women reciting these prayers; perhaps they do not know them or where to find them.

¹¹⁹ Halakhically speaking, it is mandatory to recite a *berakhah aharonah* (final blessing) after consuming any food. Since this blessing has no associated *segulah*, many of the women who do not regularly recite blessings over food may regard it as unimportant; it is also much longer than the other blessings, thus requiring more knowledge and possibly a prayerbook to provide the text. The rabbi certainly thought they should be saying it, when asked why so few women recited it.

¹²⁰ *Nishmat* forms part of the sabbath morning service. The prayer is regarded as having special powers by Sefardim; Rabbi Locardo told me that ‘it confers an extra soul’ on the sabbath and that women had ‘taken on’ the practice of reciting it publicly. One of the *berakhah* party attendees told me, ‘*Nishmat* is to say thank you, whenever anything happens, or if somebody has a car accident, God forbid, and they’ve come out of it, or they’ve had a fire in the house, or they’ve lost their home, or they had a big trial. So you make a *se’udat mitsvah*, *hoda’ah* [ceremonial meal, for thanksgiving], thanking Hashem, so they always say *Nishmas*.’ (Menucha Mizrahi, interview).

¹²¹ Presumably a rabbi at the tomb actually issued the blessing; a mobile phone was held up by Rabbi Locardo and a long, incomprehensible speech in Hebrew poured out, to which the women eagerly responded with cries of ‘Amen’. Printed forms were also distributed on which attendees could write requests (and fill in direct debits for donations), which were collected in order to be taken to the tomb.

¹²² At the first *berakhah* party I attended, a woman entered halfway through and spoke to the rabbi; he told the attendees that she was ill and had an autistic son, and urged them to help her. The women responded with overwhelming generosity (see below).

On another occasion, it was announced that a cancer victim who had been a regular attendee had just eaten a meal for the first time in two weeks and showed signs of improvement; the women were very excited and two jumped to their feet to announce that they had personally performed extra pious acts on her behalf.¹²³ In addition, just as in the Stanmore WTG, the party provides an opportunity for women to serve as the agents of prayer for friends and family in need; this was apparent when women listed the names of those for whom they were praying or offered more general prayers for the welfare of the Jewish people before reciting the blessing. In a world where women's voices are not heard in synagogue, the *berakhah* party provides a sacred space and time in which women are the main players, powerful and prominent. The women are very conscious of the existence of practices and opportunities for wielding such spiritual power, and the organizer and others often told them about similar events which they could attend: *halah* parties in private homes were advertised, for instance, with one described by the organizer as 'very powerful'.

The rabbi who acts as 'host' was aware of this:

Experience is so powerful. A *shiur* or class is passive and people feel intimidated. When all you have to do is to say a blessing, it's not intimidating. It's very empowering, it helps women's self-esteem; they leave feeling elated and special, having made a difference. [...] The women feel very holy, it works ... It's most important that a woman can feel on top of the world by reciting a blessing, everybody can do it, plus it has educational value, they learn the correct blessings, it's didactic.¹²⁴

The women clearly preferred to exercise such spiritual power themselves rather than to delegate it, as shown by their eagerness to give money to a woman who entered to ask for donations. Seizing this opportunity to give *tsedakah* themselves directly to someone who needed it,¹²⁵ they crammed a couple of plastic cups full of £20 notes and coins, with almost every woman making a contribution. In contrast, when a visiting rabbi asked for donations to support his *kolel* (study institution for married men) and passed out direct debit forms to fill in, few women availed themselves of the opportunity, in spite of the organizer's announcement that 'They get all the

¹²³ See the vignette at the beginning of Ch. 1.

¹²⁴ Rabbi Locardo, interview.

¹²⁵ Not only is the giving of *tsedakah* a commandment, but it is widely regarded as a powerful protective practice: 'Charity preserves from death' (Proverbs 10: 2).

yeshuot in the world! Put your name and they will pray for you!’ A similarly half-hearted response was made to the appeal for donations for the tomb of Benjamin.

In addition, the party is an enjoyable social occasion, at which friends can chat and enjoy each other’s company, while simultaneously ‘doing good’. One middle-aged woman of Tunisian origin confided to me that she was ‘not religious’ but liked being around religious people, and since she lived on her own, the party provided a good social opportunity: ‘Yesterday I went to the theatre, tomorrow it’s *shul*, this evening there’s this.’ She also took the opportunity to fill out the form for prayers to be sent to the tomb of Benjamin, adding a request for ‘a good husband’ and good health.

The *berakhah* party is an exception to the usual exclusion of women’s communal religious activities from the synagogue. In contrast to Stanmore WTG, it is not frowned upon by the religious authorities, but is incorporated into sacred space, with the synagogue rabbi, the representative of those authorities, present and playing a central role. It is significant that it takes place in a Sefardi synagogue, which is not controlled by the London Beth Din, and in a context of conscious Sefardi self-definition in relation to the larger Ashkenazi community. Many Sefardim feel slighted and despised by Ashkenazim,¹²⁶ and one response is to present the position of Sefardi women as better than that of Ashkenazi women.¹²⁷

While *berakhah* parties in Israel and America have developed as women-only rituals, the London examples are very clearly dominated and validated by the presence of men. While this gives gravitas and an official character to the ritual, it also means that the women are not perceived as running an all-female event in the sacred space of the synagogue, thus reducing potential male opposition.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ ‘I think that people do still think that Sefardis don’t know anything, and that we’re not as learned as Ashkenazis, we’re not as *frum* as Ashkenazis, and I take great umbrage, and my answer to that is “While your ancestors were still peasants in Poland mine were advising kings and princes in Spain”.’ Flora Rendburg, interview.

¹²⁷ Rabbi Locardo took care to let me (an Ashkenazi) know that Sefardi women were permitted to recite *birkat hagomel* (see above, n. 51) in synagogue, ‘unlike Ashkenazi women’. In fact, some Ashkenazi women do recite the blessing in synagogue.

¹²⁸ Rabbi Locardo told me there had been no opposition; it would be unlikely that anyone would object to a practice approved of and led by a respected rabbi.

The fact that the ritual itself is completely new, with no precedent, might have been expected to raise some suspicion or even condemnation in the Orthodox community, where innovation is downplayed in favour of conformity with tradition, and is sometimes used to denigrate activities.¹²⁹ Two factors account for this absence of suspicion: first, the ritual itself is made up of familiar and core practices (blessings over food), and second, it is not a practice which men have the slightest interest in reproducing—indeed, they regard it as somewhat childish. When I asked the rabbi why men would not hold *berakhah* parties, he observed:

They don't have the time, or the patience—it seems too trivial. It's a unique way for women to express their Judaism and see it as a vehicle for a relationship with the Creator ... for men, it's the ritual, *halakhah*. For women, the message conveyed by a *berakhah* is like that of a Gemara [Talmud] class for men; because women are not obliged [in Torah study] and don't express themselves in Torah study, Torah commentary becomes the mitzvah. So the mitzvah becomes Torah; the Torah commentary becomes energized—whereas for men 'action' and 'commentary' are separate. What's the point of a *berakhah* unless it makes you think about relationship [with God]; men are not able to do this. They look at the *halakhah* rather than at the meaning ... According to kabbalah, learning is part of the mitzvah—this doesn't apply to every man. But that is all women do—it is not an arbitrary act. Men are only conscious of time and duty.¹³⁰

While not entirely coherent, this comment follows a recent line of Orthodox apologetic that denigrates men's traditional activities (men are 'only conscious of time and duty') while exalting the inner, essentialist spirituality of women; unsurprisingly it stops short of applying this notion in practice, and of drawing the potential conclusion that women should therefore be in charge of their own spiritual lives and activities, and indeed should actually provide leadership and models for men. In spite of this apologetic claim, the observation that men have no interest in *berakhah* parties is confirmed by the behaviour of the men present at the parties. The rabbis who attended as speakers took no further part in the proceedings; while they did recite blessings before they ate (as they would have in any case), they did not answer 'Amen' to the women's blessings, and spent the time taken up by the blessing rounds in studying sacred books, texting, and chatting to each other. Through the

¹²⁹ Cf. the London Beth Din's justification of their refusal to let a bat mitzvah girl read from the Torah, since 'Our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers [...] were never called up to the Torah'. See Ch. 3, section on bat mitzvah.

¹³⁰ Rabbi Locardo, interview.

(closed) windows in the wall separating the women's section from the main synagogue, a dozen or so men were visible throughout the entire party, studying in small groups or on their own. It is clear to everyone that the 'trivial' *berakhah* party is for women only. The ritual can thus be seen as non-threatening, even if held in the synagogue; it simply does not compete with the central male activities of Torah study and formal prayer.

Interestingly, this male dissociation from *berakhah* parties leads to divergent understandings of the event by men and women. While the rabbi described it as an occasion for empowering women and making them 'feel holy', he also saw it as an opportunity to teach the women the correct blessings. He denied any 'magic' component, offering an elaborate kabbalistic explanation of the effect of the ritual: the performance of commandments, such as reciting blessings or giving charity, leads to and expresses the repentance (*teshuvah*) of the individual, which in return is rewarded by the accumulation of merit; this enables prayer to be answered.

In contrast, the women see the ritual in a much more functional way, as a 'powerful' activity that achieves tangible results through the intervention of angels, or by semi-magical means. The organizer told me that the power of the word 'Amen' is immense, and that it is more important to say 'Amen' to a blessing than to say the blessing itself; she also noted that 'when we say "Amen", all the angels say it too'. Another attendee told me that 'A *malakh* [angel] is created for every *amen* you answer. A *malakh* that protects you and protects the person who made the *berakhah*.'¹³¹ Just before some women took *halah*, the organizer announced that this was 'a very good time to make *kavanot* [prayer intentions]',¹³² and another woman added that 'whatever somebody wants to wish they can wish' even if not taking *halah* themselves, because 'we are all part of *am yisra'el*'.¹³³ It was also notable that when a visiting rabbi solicited donations, he made no claims that this would have tangible results—it was a woman who remarked that his *kolel* 'gets all the *yeshuot* in

¹³¹ Menucha Mizrahi, interview.

¹³² The term *kavanot* comes from the kabbalistic tradition, in which it is used in the sense of intentions in prayer for the unification and wellbeing of the divine *sefirot*; the women do not seem to be using the term in this sense, however, but in the sense of intending to pray on behalf of other people experiencing difficulties.

¹³³ The use of the word 'wish' rather than 'pray' also suggests a mechanical or magical view of the ritual's efficacy.

the world!', and another woman who observed that if you gave more than £5 you would get all the benefits of the *kolel*'s prayers. On two occasions male speakers attempted to play down the thaumaturgic qualities of the ritual, by observing that sincere prayer has to precede trust in the efficacy of *segulot*, and that rituals to remove the evil eye are only needed by those who have no *emunah* (faith and trust in God), but this did not impress the women, in contrast to the miracle stories which they greeted with loud exclamations of wonder and appreciation.

5. Tehilim groups, halah parties, and ahavat yisra'el groups

I turn now to a group of women's communal rituals that resemble the *berakhah* party in goals and, in the case of the first two, techniques. Reciting the book of Psalms (*Sefer tehilim*) has been considered a pious activity for centuries. Many men and women recite the entire book once a week, or once a day, often on behalf of friends or acquaintances with health or other problems. Psalm recitation is considered particularly appropriate for women, especially in *haredi* circles, since they do not (or are not thought to) share men's obligation to recite the three daily prayer services, nor the male obligation to study Torah, another source of merit. In recent years, however, a new practice has developed of women gathering to say psalms together, often dividing the book up between those present in order to complete the entire book during the session. These gatherings are usually preceded or followed by listing the names of those individuals on whose behalf the recitation is being performed; the categories of finding a livelihood, finding a match, having children, and regaining health used at the *berakhah* parties are often mentioned on these occasions too. Occasionally a *tehilim* group may be convened as a one-off event for a specific purpose, like one advertised in September 2012 on the EdgwareK email list: 'We are trying to organize a tehillim group for next shabbos [sabbath], which is also Rachel Imainu's [the matriarch Rachel's] *yahrzeit*, so the whole *sefer tehillim* can be said for those in need of *shidduchim* [matches].' There are also regular groups that meet weekly or monthly.

The group I attended in a private home in Golders Green started in 2008 in response to a particular individual's illness, and now meets once a month, on or near Rosh Hodesh. It consisted of seven *haredi* women, ranging in age from the 20s to the

70s.¹³⁴ All wore *sheytls* and dark clothes. We sat around the dining table, covered with a flowery plastic cloth and surrounded by tall bookshelves housing a substantial library of classic religious texts and a large collection of family photographs. After some chatting as newcomers took off their coats, we got down to business. Each woman took a few sky-blue pamphlets from a heap on the table; these contained the book of Psalms, divided into 24 parts (one per booklet), produced by Aneinu ('Answer Us'),¹³⁵ an American *haredi* organization founded in 1999, dedicated to encouraging Jewish women to hold communal recitations of psalms. Our hostess, Zelda Ehrlich, a rabbi's wife and librarian in her 60s, read a long prayer printed at the beginning of each booklet, and we then started reciting our individual booklets simultaneously, whispering the words rapidly under our breath. The pace seemed very fast, as I had only just reached my second booklet by the time my neighbour had completed all hers and reached for one from my pile. I finished fifth (there was a very faint flavour of a race, and clearly one was not meant to linger with devotion over every word), and waited silently with the others till the last two women completed their booklets. Zelda then recited the standard *misheberakh* prayer, asking for God's blessings on particular people; when she reached the point at which personal names are inserted, she picked up a long list of names and read them out. Each woman then kissed the booklet she was holding, and returned it to the pile before leaving; the whole recitation had taken little more than half an hour. Unlike the rather chaotic and strongly social atmosphere at *berakhah* parties, the mood here was down to earth, focused, and businesslike; the only 'Amens' uttered were said quietly at the end of the *misheberakh* prayer.

In contrast to the quiet, devotional atmosphere of the *tehilim* group, *halah* parties tend to be highly sociable. In 2012 I attended one at a private home in Edgware. It was organized by Bracha Abelman, a young, devout Modern Orthodox mother, who had read about *halah* parties in *Binah*, a American *haredi* women's magazine widely available in Britain. She originally decided to hold a *halah* party after the death of a young mother which had had a profound effect on the Modern Orthodox community in north-west London, both 'as a memorial and as a response'. A group of women studied the laws of taking *halah* during the *sheloshim* (30-day mourning period), and

¹³⁴ I attended on 3 Mar. 2011.

¹³⁵ <<http://www.aneinu.com/>>.

met on the thirtieth day for the actual event. They then decided to hold it every month, on or near Rosh Hodesh.¹³⁶

When I arrived, carrying a large plastic bowl containing a packet of flour as instructed, several women were already in the spacious kitchen, unpacking their bowls and flour on a long line of tables pushed together and covered with plastic sheets. Bottles of olive oil, salt containers, packets of dried yeast, and water jugs were arranged along the centre of the tables. More women crowded in, until there were about 20, all talking at once. It was clear that many had not attended before, and that several had never actually made bread. Bracha had printed out a recipe for *halah* (which signifies both ‘dough’ and the braided loaves made for the sabbath), which also carried basic rules for the ritual of ‘taking *halah*’, including the appropriate blessing. She had some trouble making herself heard over the noise of women inquiring about the next step in the process, asking for ingredients to be passed, laughing at the mess they were making, and chatting to each other, but patiently explained, advised, and assisted, until everyone had produced a large mass of bread dough. At this point she managed to get everyone to be quiet as they kneaded their dough, and gave a homiletic explanation of the commandment, linking each ingredient with a desirable trait: ‘Flour represents the energy we need for serving God ... salt, like criticism, is painful and can sting the hearer, so should come in small doses ... Jewish kings are anointed with olive oil. Anointing the bread for our royal table reminds us of the honour due to our friends, family, and ourselves.’ A certain amount of confusion ensued when she explained that since none of us was making enough dough to require the taking of *halah*,¹³⁷ we would have to ‘combine’ our dough in pairs to enable one of each pair to perform the commandment, though we could separate it afterwards and retain our own dough, to be baked at home; the level of halakhic complexity involved was beyond several women, who were mystified. Bracha sorted out the pairs and helped those taking *halah* to do it correctly and say the blessing, to which everyone responded ‘Amen’. Some women preceded their blessing by mentioning the Hebrew name of a friend or acquaintance seeking a marriage partner or suffering from illness, and ‘dedicating’ the merit conferred by fulfilling the commandment for their benefit. The event ended with the women

¹³⁶ Bracha Adelman, telephone conversation, 15 Nov. 2011.

¹³⁷ See Ch. 1 n. 15.

braiding loaves, once again chatting and asking advice, before taking them home to bake in preparation for the sabbath.¹³⁸

The third type of activity, the *ahavat yisra'el* group, seems to have been introduced to Britain in July 2012, when the 'Jewish Women's Project for Ahavas Yisrael', founded in America in 2008, was presented at a Tishah Be'Av programme run by Orah, a *haredi* organization for women's education. The project is run from an American *haredi* website,¹³⁹ which provides materials to be downloaded and used in discussion groups; its aim is to help women 'Learn, discuss and interact with others to learn about the tremendous mitzvah of Ahavas Yisrael - Loving your fellow Jew, thereby accruing tremendous merit for Klal Yisroel [the Jewish people].' A group for post-seminary girls in Golders Green started advertising in September 2012, and the group I visited was started in October 2012 by Deborah Greenbaum, a young married woman, who heard about the project 'at a *shiur*'.

About eight women usually attend the group, which meets every month in Deborah's house, though on the occasion I visited there was only one other woman, an unmarried friend of Deborah's in her 20s. We sat in the living room, with the shelves of religious classics and long lines of family photographs typical of Orthodox homes; a book entitled *Stages of Spiritual Growth* was lying on a chair. Deborah had moved from a traditionalist upbringing towards a *haredi* lifestyle; she had also persuaded her parents, who live in the same house, to move from Ilford, an area with a declining traditionalist population and next to no *haredim*, to Edgware, which has a growing *haredi* community, and to adopt a more observant lifestyle. Her mother, who joined the session in the middle, wore a head covering, but her grandmother, who also lives there, did not. After bringing refreshments, Deborah handed out lesson sheets she had downloaded from the 'Ahavas Yisrael' website, and read the week's lesson script aloud. We discussed last week's 'stretch'—a challenge 'to smile at everyone and greet them first' (neither woman could remember how she had done on this), before reading an improving story based on the concept of *ona'at devarim* (injuring someone by means of words), used here to indicate the necessity of

¹³⁸ For an account and analysis of an Israeli *halah* party, see El-Or, 'A Temple in your Kitchen', in which the ritual was explicitly linked to the Temple, with the women acting as priests.

¹³⁹ <www.ayproject.com> (accessed 17 Nov. 2015). The website records 15 groups in Britain, 8 of which are in London, in *haredi* areas, and 7 in Manchester.

sensitivity to others: a woman had asked to help at an engagement party but had been told there was no need. Later she phoned the organizer and explained how hurt she had been by her exclusion. The script underlined the moral that one should ‘refrain from causing pain to another Jew’, and identified the character fault presented here as ‘a desire to control, and a lack of clarity in communicating’. As instructed by the script, we dutifully discussed the topic for a while, and then moved on to the next discussion topic: ‘When we have the urge to be nasty, it’s a sign we are suffering: is this true?’, followed by another gentle, meandering, and rather directionless discussion. At one point Deborah observed that ‘We should all be asking “Am I being an *eved hashem* [servant of God] right now?”’ and that this kind of issue ‘is deeper than mitzvot’. After we ran out of things to say, Deborah ended the session by reading out next week’s ‘stretch’: ‘Count to 10 and think what the person is really saying to you before lashing out.’ The general tone of the session was that of a slightly self-conscious but very earnest self-help group, with emphasis on developing positive ethical traits.

All three groups are examples of a new trend in *haredi* women’s religious activity. All are designed to accumulate merit on behalf of others in order to promote their welfare, in line with the central role of nurturing and protecting the (Jewish) family and the community assigned to women in *haredi* culture. It is also significant that these three groups were inspired by American *haredi* models or organized using materials from American *haredi* websites of a type that has proliferated in recent years (in spite of bans on using the internet imposed by right-wing *haredi* rabbis).¹⁴⁰ Many of these websites and the practices they promote are closely linked to non-Jewish self-help literature and movements in their emphasis on introspective analysis and improvement of one’s character traits.¹⁴¹ Both websites mentioned here, as well as articles about such practices in *Binah*, record that these practices were initiated by women, but all these sources take great pains to emphasize that they are under rabbinic supervision and have full rabbinic approval. Women’s initiatives may be praiseworthy, but in the *haredi* world they have to be validated by male rabbinic authority.

¹⁴⁰ Portnoy, ‘Haredim and the Internet’.

¹⁴¹ *Haredi* ‘self-help’ classes specifically aimed at women are often advertised on EdgwareK. They are very similar to the techniques of producing a pious self characterized by Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

Like the *berakhah* party, these pietistic activities encourage women to focus on other people and their relationships with them, as well as to shape an ideal self that is self-sacrificing, considerate, and modest. They revolve around the idea of accumulating merit (*zekhut*), spiritual ‘capital’ that can be donated for the welfare of others rather than used for oneself.¹⁴² A similar concept can be seen in other recent pietistic practices pursued by women, such as ‘*leshon hara* [gossip] watches’, in which women undertake to refrain from any hurtful talk or gossip for periods of several hours, thereby earning merit; or mutual prayer watches, in which childless couples undertake to pray for other couples in the same situation.¹⁴³

6. Gemahs

A *gemah* (acronym of *gemilut hasadim*, ‘deeds of kindness’) is a free loan society. Common in eastern Europe before World War II, they exist in most large Jewish communities, particularly in *haredi* circles, though non-*haredim* also run *gemahs*. Modern *gemahs* often lend items, such as wedding dresses or medical equipment, rather than making monetary loans. The EdgwareK community email list ran advertisements for about fifty *gemahs* between November 2010 and May 2013, only one of which offered traditional interest-free loans. The items available for loan range from clothing, baby equipment, and breast pumps to mezuzahs, balloons, folding chairs, children’s Purim costumes, and bread for those who have discovered that they have run out of it after the shops close. I called about 25 of the telephone numbers provided, and spoke to the founders or managers of 13 *gemahs*.

Nine of them had been founded and were run by women; three had been founded by married couples; and one had been founded by a man, reinforcing the claim of those to whom I talked that ‘most *gemahs* are run by women’. Nine had been established in memory of a relation, a friend, or a neighbour, with equal numbers of men and women being commemorated, several of whom ‘had no family’ to remember them.

¹⁴² The idea of *zekhut* as spiritual capital is deeply rooted in Judaism, as in the concept of *zekhut avot*, the ‘merit of the ancestors’, or of the biblical patriarchs, which can be mobilized on behalf of the Jewish people. The idea that *zekhut* may be accumulated on behalf of someone else rather than for one’s own benefit seems to be a particularly strong emphasis in recent *haredi* women’s practices, parallel to the emphasis on women as enablers of husbands and children; see also Ch. 6.

¹⁴³ This is not totally selfless, since there is a rabbinic dictum that those who pray for others who are in need will have their own needs fulfilled; see BT *Bava kama* 92a. I am indebted to Ian Gamse for this reference.

The smallest consisted of a Satnav device that a man lent out in memory of his father, while the largest, the Family World Clothing Gemach, was founded by two *haredi* women over 30 years ago; with the help of ten volunteers they supply clothes, shoes, wigs, bedlinen, and other household items to anyone who needs them—‘we don’t ask questions’. The founder to whom I spoke regarded the enterprise as a practical expression of *hesed*, and felt it was supported by divine providence (*hashgahah peratit*). She emphasized that the *gemah* was organized with particular care to avoid embarrassing or shaming others—a central Jewish value—with individual appointments at the warehouse scheduled for recipients so they would not bump into acquaintances.

Other women shared this view of the foundation and maintenance of a *gemah* as a religious activity: a young woman who set up a *gemah* for Israeli sim cards with her husband, with help from her sisters, spoke of it as ‘a way to do *hesed*’, and another, South African woman who founded a baby and toddler equipment *gemah* ‘felt that if we have things we should give them [...] my religion is a strong sense of community’.¹⁴⁴ The desire to perpetuate the memory of a dead relative or friend, or to ‘elevate their soul’ is often central: the founder of a *gemah* for breast pumps and sterilisers named it after her maternal grandmother ‘in her merit’, and another woman had joined her two sisters in founding a *gemah* for ‘wedding *shtik*’ (props for wedding entertainments) after their father died, ‘*le’ilui neshamah* [for the elevation of his soul]; we couldn’t go to weddings¹⁴⁵ and we wanted to bring some happiness to other people’.

As with women’s involvement in welfare organizations, their extensive participation in and founding of *gemahs* goes unnoticed as an aspect of their religious lives, but it undoubtedly plays a central role in women’s desire to live in conformity with Jewish values and models.

¹⁴⁴ She emphasized that ‘community’ included both Jews and non-Jews.

¹⁴⁵ Attendance at joyous or recreational events is forbidden in the year after a parent’s death.

New developments: sharing the sacred with men

Recently, a new trend seems to have emerged within the British Orthodox community: the co-operation of men and women in finding sacred space or rituals that can be shared, at least to some extent. Once again drawing on precedents from America and Israel, small groups, predominantly of highly educated professionals in their 30s and 40s from the Modern Orthodox sector of the community, have begun to hold services known as partnership *minyanim*, in which women lead non-obligatory parts of the service, as well as reading the Torah and *haftarah* and being called up for *aliyot*. Women also give *derashot* at these services,¹⁴⁶ and recite *kadish* if they are mourners. The much less spectacular (and generally unremarked) practice of celebrating the birth of a daughter with some type of *simhat bat* ceremony, which is becoming more common among the Modern Orthodox, is also part of the same trend.

7. Partnership *minyanim*

The first partnership *minyan*, Shirah Hadashah, was founded in Jerusalem, in January 2002. Others have followed, with about 28 groups in Israel, the USA, and Australia by 2014.¹⁴⁷ In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several British Orthodox women returned from holidays in Israel with accounts of having attended and enjoyed Shirah Hadashah, but they do not seem to have tried to initiate anything similar at home until 2009, when a group of a few dozen people, mostly young families with school-age children and parents who work in elite professions, decided to hold partnership services in private houses on Friday nights.¹⁴⁸ In practice this was not very different from a standard service, since the only non-obligatory part of the prayers is the opening sequence of psalms and the kabbalistic sixteenth-century hymn *lekhah dodi*, most of which are sung by the entire community; this was duly led by a woman. A *devar torah* was also presented by a woman, with a man leading the main part of the service. About 50 people, with a slight predominance of women, attended these services, held on a more or less monthly basis for about a year and a half. The atmosphere was joyful and enthusiastic, with *divrei torah* of high quality,

¹⁴⁶ As opposed to the United Synagogue practice of allowing bat mitzvah girls (though not other women) to give a *derashah* after the conclusion of the formal service.

¹⁴⁷ JOFA website, <http://www.jofa.org/Resources/Partnership_Minyanim> (accessed 23 Jan. 2014). This figure does not include the British groups described here.

¹⁴⁸ My husband and I took part in four or five of these.

often given by prominent educators. The services differed from standard synagogue prayers in the spirited singing and the presence of women, since very few women attend synagogue on a Friday night.

There was some discussion about trying a sabbath morning service, which would have been much more complicated, necessitating the borrowing of a Torah scroll and the training of women to read it, but at this point several individuals, both men and women, became nervous, and the plan was never carried out. The principal issue of concern expressed was that ‘someone’ would ‘find out’ that a particular person had attended, and that their children might have difficulty in being accepted at Jewish schools; for a couple of people who held prominent positions in Jewish education, there were concerns that the authorities in charge of their institutions would not approve, or that institutional funders might withdraw support if they learned of their participation. The social price of failure to conform was very apparent, for both men and women.¹⁴⁹ Shortly after this, the services gradually came to an end, apparently because of these fears and the lack of a strong organizer.

Not all participants were content to abandon the project, however, and two years later some of them organized a partnership morning service on a Rosh Hodesh that fell on a Sunday,¹⁵⁰ immediately preceding the launch of the British branch of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Association (JOFA) on 9 June 2013. Over a hundred people turned up, with some having to be turned away, and two groups subsequently formed to organize services, one in Borehamwood,¹⁵¹ and the other in north-west London. In addition to the regular services, the Borehamwood group organized a series of well-attended lectures on various related halakhic issues (such as *kol islah*, the prohibition on men hearing women singing), and also set up an elaborate website and an email newsletter.¹⁵² By mid-2015 three new groups had been founded in Golders Green, Hendon, and Finchley, with attendance ranging from about 50 to 100.

¹⁴⁹ It seems unlikely that any such social sanctions, particularly in the case of schools, could be taken, but the fear of them is very significant, testifying to participants’ perceptions. The issue of job security and loss of institutional funding seems more real.

¹⁵⁰ The Rosh Hodesh service includes Torah reading, which makes it ideal for a partnership *minyán*: unlike the sabbath, travel by car is permitted, enabling people who live far away to attend.

¹⁵¹ Rucker, ‘Women to Lead Prayers’.

¹⁵² <<http://borehamwoodpartnershipminyán.weebly.com/>> (accessed 23 Jan. 2014).

I attended the first sabbath morning service in Borehamwood, on 14 December 2013, which was held in a local events hall; it proved too small for the hundred or so people who turned up, and several had to stand just outside the door, or squeeze in and sit on the floor. A children's service was organized in another room. The majority of participants were young—not surprisingly for a community with a high number of young families, seeking cheaper housing than in north-west London—and all were Modern Orthodox or traditionalist. The *mehitsah* divided the space longitudinally, so that men and women were side by side, rather women being behind the men. Unusually for an Orthodox service, most women turned up at the beginning, and there was a real sense of excitement. The *birkhot hashahar* and *pesukei dezimra* sections were led by a woman, a young journalist and mother who sang loudly and confidently, and subsequent sections, from *barkhu*, the 'call to prayer', onwards were led by men. During the Torah reading, four women *leyened* from the Torah—it was noticeable that the standard of their reading was sometimes higher than that of the male readers—and I read the *haftarah* (prophetic portion). At the end, the mediaeval liturgical poem *anim zemirot* was led by two little girls. There was very little talking, and both men and women threw themselves into the singing with energy; after the service a participant noted that 'the passion of the congregation lifted my prayer', and another described it as a 'lively, uplifting, and spiritual experience'.¹⁵³ After the end of the sabbath, about 20 participants turned up to a social and educational event in a private home, featuring a talk by a leader of the Jerusalem Shirah Hadashah community, as well as devotional singing, refreshments, and a chance to socialize.

At the time of writing, it is too early to predict whether partnership *minyanim* will continue to flourish or spread.¹⁵⁴ There have already been rumbles of opposition from the Orthodox establishment: in December 2013 the new Chief Rabbi announced that such services could not be held on United Synagogue premises, but stopped short of declaring them forbidden. If they do survive, it will be instructive to see whether they develop along the lines described by Elana Sztokman in her analysis of

¹⁵³ These remarks match observations by Sztokman, *The Men's Section*, that men who attend partnership *minyanim* are often seeking a more spiritual experience than that provided by standard synagogues.

¹⁵⁴ As of late 2015 the Borehamwood group is continuing to attract about 60-80 worshippers on Saturday mornings; they have also held two very successful Simhat Torah morning services, with about 80 participants.

similar groups in Israel, the USA, Canada, and Australia.¹⁵⁵ With the exception of *simhat bat* ceremonies, this is the first attempt in Britain by Orthodox men and women to co-operate in creating a sacred space and form of ritual that enables women's participation, perhaps marking the beginning of a fundamental shift in Orthodox perceptions of gender.

8. *Simhat bat* ceremonies

Though much lower-profile than partnership *minyanim*, *simhat bat* ceremonies marking a girl's birth also provide a rare example of a ritual shared by men and women. Historical studies reveal the existence of such ceremonies,¹⁵⁶ sometimes held only among women, in earlier periods, but their practice in Britain is recent, except for the *zeved bat* ('gift of a daughter') and *fada* ceremonies held by the Sefardi community:

I was taken to *shul* when I was a month old, by my mother and father, and I had what we call a *fada*, where I was brought in and named at a special ceremony in front of the ark on Sunday, and my sister brought me in on a cushion.¹⁵⁷

The trend towards marking a daughter's birth has grown considerably in the last three or four decades, particularly in America and Israel, and knowledge of these foreign models has probably influenced developments in Britain. They are particularly popular among the Modern Orthodox, less usual among traditionalists, and unknown in the *haredi* community. In October 2003 the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, composed a *simhat bat* ceremony for his granddaughter, partly based on the traditional Sefardi *zeved bat* ceremony.¹⁵⁸ This text was circulated and used by others, and was incorporated into the new edition of the Orthodox prayerbook, published in December 2006, at the Chief Rabbi's insistence.¹⁵⁹ It has since been used by many families; in late 2013 it was even used in a ceremony held in Finchley United Synagogue, led by a rabbi. Others prefer to design their own ceremony, often

¹⁵⁵ Sztokman, *The Men's Section*.

¹⁵⁶ The Ashkenazi *hollekreisch* and Sefardi *zeved bat* are examples; see Ch. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Flora Rendburg, interview. No other interviewees mentioned any birth-connected ceremony, either for themselves or their daughters.

¹⁵⁸ Eve Sacks, email, 27 Jan. 2014.

¹⁵⁹ Elkan Levy and Simon Gould, both involved in producing the prayerbook, confirmed this in personal conversation, 11 Feb. 2014.

incorporating elements such as readings about female biblical figures, a *devar torah* given by a parent or a friend, refreshments, and an explanation of the baby's names; it is customary in Britain to give children both an 'English' and a 'Jewish' name, the latter often the Hebrew or Yiddish name of a deceased relative. Because *simhat bat* is a new, unofficial ceremony, with no fixed form or halakhic rules, women often play a prominent role—reading texts, giving a *devar torah* or speech—in stark contrast to traditional *berit milah* (circumcision) ceremonies, in which the only female role is for a female friend of the family (*kvaterin*) to carry in the baby and hand him to a man (*kvater*),¹⁶⁰ who takes him to the father. At a *berit*, the mother plays no role at all, usually sitting anxiously in another room while the baby is socialized into the male world by men; at a *simhat bat*, in contrast, she often gives the *devar torah* or speaks about the baby's name.

The *simhat bat* ceremony is an example of a non-traditional, female-focused ceremony in which women play a role alongside men, that seems to be accepted by the traditionalist and Modern Orthodox alike, with no opposition—in contrast to partnership *minyanim*. Once again we see that new ceremonies with no halakhic implications and no intrusion upon male ritual ground arouse little resistance, particularly if initiated or explicitly approved by rabbinic authorities,¹⁶¹ in contrast to women's participation in performances of traditional rituals that are perceived as constitutive of masculinity, as in the case of partnership *minyanim*.

* * *

Consideration of these 'non-official' communal rituals provides further support for the threefold division of Orthodox women into *haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist groups. In the rituals examined above, the key element is that of male initiation or approval of the practice. If it is initiated or approved of by a rabbi, as with *berakhah* parties, problematic elements of innovation or location in the sacred space of a synagogue can be ignored. This is the type of communal ritual initiated and promoted by *haredi* women. If women initiate and carry through a practice in the

¹⁶⁰ Usually the *kvaterin*'s husband; this honour is often given to childless couples. See Ch. 6.

¹⁶¹ The ceremony's authorship by the Chief Rabbi and inclusion in the Orthodox prayerbook provide it with official backing.

face of rabbinic disapproval, however, these are precisely the elements cited as preventing its approval; the only women unhappy enough with the current state of affairs to run this risk are some of those in the Modern Orthodox group.

In addition, the more a practice replicates a traditionally male activity, such as communal performance of liturgy or Torah reading, the less likely it is to be approved, since it is perceived as threatening gender roles and invading exclusively masculine territory. Women's activity in setting up and running *gemahs* is thus unproblematic, since these have no ritual or gendered character, but women's Megillah readings and prayer groups, in contrast, are contested. Though some *haredi* women do attend women's Megillah readings, no such readings have been set up by *haredi* women, and I do not know of any *haredi* women who have attended the more controversial WTGs or partnership *minyán* services.

Both principles are illustrated in the history of Stanmore women's *tefilah* group; although it was originally set up either on the local rabbi's initiative or with his support of women's initiative, the London Beth Din, a higher source of rabbinic authority, deemed it transgressive and took active steps to discourage and control it.¹⁶² As noted in Chapter 3, in most Orthodox communities, women's absence from synagogue is not generally remarked upon. However, the concept of women attending a service that parallels the standard one is immediately challenging, and (in the eyes of the authorities) potentially subversive; hence the insistence of the London Beth Din, when Stanmore WTG was finally allowed to meet in the synagogue, that the group's name be changed to the 'Women's Learning Experience', to avoid the implication that they were praying or holding a ritual comparable to what was happening in the synagogue sanctuary.

In the *haredi* sector, women promoting new practices such as *tehilim* groups and *ahavat yisra'el* groups know they must obtain rabbinic approval. Even though many of these practices aid the construction of a pious and ethical self, as described by Mahmood, the aims and nature of this pious ideal are controlled by the male hierarchy, so that women's agency is largely exercised around and within the

¹⁶² See also the Beth Din's intervention to prevent Torah scrolls being carried through the women's section in synagogue; Ch. 2 n. 87.

constraints imposed by men and male-determined ideals of pious women (a point that Mahmood does not discuss). Nevertheless, women's different interpretations and understandings of their activity can undermine established relations of power, even unintentionally, as in the case of *berakhah* parties. These new women's rituals parallel the feminist concept of 'women's spaces', encouraging and enabling women's autonomy,¹⁶³ although this, along with the participants' sense of power and control of events, goes unnoticed by male authorities, who might well be disturbed by these aspects and by thaumaturgic interpretations given by some attendees.

Traditionalist women generally shun or even oppose innovations in women's ritual roles, unless male authorities approve them; many traditionalist women strongly oppose WTGs and partnership *minyanim*, while they often attend events such as *berakhah* and *halah* parties, which run no risk of being categorized as 'inauthentic' and hence threatening their Jewish identity. They do not initiate new rituals and display little interest in reaching new spiritual heights or creating a pious self; their main interest in attending communal rituals appears to be social, reinforcing their sense of Jewish identity and community membership.

Using Bell's concepts, the differences between these rituals and their differing receptions can be seen in terms of what the new rituals 'echo ... invert ... allude to ... and den[y]'.¹⁶⁴ When WTGs echo standard male-led services but invert the gender of the leaders, denying their exclusive power to lead and represent the entire community, they become troubling and illicit; when *berakhah* parties allude to a minor, non-obligatory ritual such as a Tu B'shevat *seder*, and echo traditional ideas of women's nurturing role, they are perceived as harmless and unthreatening by men (though it is noticeable that women describe them as 'powerful'). Indeed, when the wider context changes, as with the introduction of the highly threatening partnership *minyanim*, with their assertion of much more balanced (though not egalitarian) gender roles, the previously dangerous WTGs may be re-evaluated as a protective measure that can be employed to ward off the greater danger and may therefore be recategorized as acceptable, as has happened in several United synagogues in the last year.

¹⁶³ McFadden, 'Why Women's Spaces Are Crucial'.

¹⁶⁴ See above, Ch. 1.

Chapter 5: Women's life in the family: 'official' activities

'I think the woman's role is *very* important, I think it's even more important than the man's role, because it's the wife who does the things that ensure continuity.' Flora Rendburg, interview.

* * *

After examining women's activity in the communal, public sphere, we will turn to what they do at home and as individuals. Orthodox Judaism is firmly rooted in the world of everyday action, since several central commandments and their halakhic elaboration include spheres such as the preparation and consumption of food, the observance of a weekly sabbath and numerous festivals, dress, education, and the recitation of blessings before and after eating and in other daily contexts. The home is explicitly designated as a sacred sphere, to an extent perhaps less obvious in Christian and general British culture.¹⁶⁵ Since Orthodox Judaism has always defined women's role as primarily domestic, it is essential to look afresh at this 'official' sphere of women's religious lives in order to compare reality with the ideal, and to discover how women understand their roles as Jewish women and the place of domestic activity within that role. We will start by considering a male-authored description, published under the title 'What is the Role of the Woman in Judaism?' on a Habad website.¹⁶⁶

In a Jewish household, the wife and mother is called in Hebrew *akeret habayit*. This means literally the 'mainstay' of the home.¹⁶⁷ It is she who largely determines the character and atmosphere of the entire home. [...] She has been entrusted with, and is completely in charge of, the kashrut of the foods and beverages that come into her kitchen and appear on the dining

¹⁶⁵ It is notable that the sociologist Nancy Ammerman, in her masterly survey of everyday religion in *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, feels obliged to urge the study of all aspects of daily life, not just formal religious affiliation and religious institutions, in order to find 'the presence of religion in society', and pleads with scholars to 'put away the biases about "real religion" that have often characterized scientific attempts at explanation' (p. 5). Such study is a natural part of investigating Orthodox Jews, and is also central to anthropological studies of religion.

¹⁶⁶ Habad website, <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1802936/jewish/Woman-in-Judaism.htm> (accessed 4 Dec. 2013).

¹⁶⁷ The phrase comes from Ps. 113: 9: 'He gives the barren woman [*akeret habayit*] a home, making her the joyous mother of children'. Orthodox apologists prefer to link the root of the word with *ikar*, 'principle', 'main part' (hence 'mainstay'), rather than with *akarrah*, 'barren woman'.

table.¹⁶⁸ She has been given the privilege of ushering in the holy Shabbat by lighting the candles on Friday [...] Thus she actually and symbolically brightens up her home with peace and harmony and with the light of Torah and mitzvot. [...]

In addition to such mitzvot as candle-lighting, separating challoh [= *halah*] from the dough, and others which the Torah entrusted primarily to Jewish daughters, there are matters which, in the natural order of things, lie in the woman's domain. [...] This refers to the observance of Taharat Hamishpachah,¹⁶⁹ which by its very nature lies in the hands of the Jewish woman. The husband is required to encourage and facilitate this mutual observance; certainly not hinder it in any way, G-d forbid. But the main responsibility—and privilege—is the wife's.

This idealized rabbinic picture focuses on the traditional three 'women's *mitsvot*', though they by no means encapsulate the whole of women's domestic role: in the interviews I conducted women spoke of preserving family traditions, making and serving food, hosting guests, cleaning for Passover, visiting the cemetery, praying, and educating their children as religious activities. Though most married (and some unmarried) women light sabbath candles, they usually talked about them in the context of sabbath preparations; few mentioned *nidah* or the *mikveh*, partly because of the private nature of these practices and partly because many United Synagogue women do not observe these rituals; and many women do not make their own *halot*, since they are easily available in Jewish bakeries.

Though the Habad source quoted above presents women as central, powerful figures, 'largely determin[ing] the character and atmosphere of the entire home', it ignores the fact that women do not usually lead or perform home-based rituals, such as reciting *kidush* and the blessing over bread (*hamotsi*) on the sabbath,¹⁷⁰ reciting *havdalah* at the end of the sabbath, reciting the blessing over the search for *hamets* on the night before Passover,¹⁷¹ leading the Passover Seder, and so on, all of which are conventionally performed by men, even though women have an equal obligation

¹⁶⁸ In practice, the *kashrut* of the food the housewife buys is guaranteed by a complex system of predominantly male supervision of food manufacturers; in addition, any question regarding *kashrut* is meant to be referred to a rabbi.

¹⁶⁹ See Ch. 1 n. 16.

¹⁷⁰ Even in exclusively female households, women often ask a male guest to recite *kidush* and *hamotsi*, only performing these rituals if no men are present.

¹⁷¹ *Hamets*, 'leavened food', is forbidden on Passover. After intensive cleaning (see below), a ritual search for *hamets* is conducted the night before Passover, customarily by candlelight, and preceded by a *berakhah*; many families 'hide' ten wrapped pieces of *hamets* to be found during the search.

in these rituals (with the possible exception of *havdalah*¹⁷²). The only exception to this lack of ritual performance is the lighting of sabbath candles, though it is not reserved for women: it is halakhically incumbent upon the household, rather than the individual, and is performed by men in the absence of a woman. Sabbath and festival candle-lighting has been associated with women from rabbinic times, but this may originally have had to do more with the fact that men are supposed to be in synagogue at candle-lighting time than with a recognition of women's ritual role within the home. Only in some Modern Orthodox families have women and men renegotiated the performance of these home rituals, as documented below.

The conception, nurturing, and education of children are often seen as central to the Jewish woman's role, even though no formal *mitsvot* are entailed: both procreation and education are halakhically incumbent on Jewish men, but not on Jewish women. Nevertheless, both men and women see these as central concerns, and women often compromise on their own religious needs or desires for the sake of their children—whether in attending synagogues where they feel alienated but their children can enjoy a friendly children's service; refraining from controversial practices or conforming to religious standards with which they do not identify in order to get their children into a particular Jewish school; or missing educational opportunities, women's services, or religious events in order to be present at a child's activity.

It seems clear that it is not *halakhah* alone that determines what women do and do not do in the domestic context. Family tradition is often much more important in women's accounts, as well as their perception that they are responsible for the continuity of Jewish tradition and affiliation to the Jewish community, and the social pressures exerted by that community.

The sabbath

Most interviewees spoke of the sabbath (*shabat*) as central to their lives, religious practice, and Jewish identity. Even in the past, when many Jewish parents could not

¹⁷² Some authorities permit women to make *havdalah* (e.g. Karo, *Shulhan arukh*, 'Orah hayim' 296: 8), while others recommend that they hear a man recite it (e.g. Moses Isserles, gloss on Karo, *ibid.*; Israel Me'ir Hakohen, *Mishnah berurah*, 297: 35), though they permit them to recite it if no man is present.

afford to take off time from work for the sabbath, women marked it as sacred time, often by preparing special food. Katherine Marks remembers that when she was growing up in a strongly Jewish but not very observant family,

Friday night was Friday night. Friday night we lit the candles, always on time, whenever that was. We didn't make *kidush*, we didn't *bentsh*, but my mum would make chicken and also she would do *tsholnt* for *shabat* lunch, and my mum had her own [practices]—there was no washing or ironing on *shabat*, it was a different day for her, although she would be quite happy to watch TV or write things or break some of the *halakhot* [laws],¹⁷³ but the day was conceptually different.

This pattern continues today, with space made for *shabat* at differing levels of observance:

Friday night we don't [go to synagogue]—George doesn't go, and we do have the TV on, we've got it on a timer switch. We'll change the channel, but not turn it on and off, that's our line in the sand. We've got the lights on a time switch. In the winter we'll eat at six, in the summer we eat [later], when George's come home and checked his emails—the computer doesn't get switched on on *shabat*. And then we have dinner and we watch a bit of TV. And on *shabat* morning we'll go to synagogue most weeks.¹⁷⁴

Many women organize their week around the sabbath: 'My week revolves round making Friday night dinner', said Belinda Cohen, and several other women were intensely conscious of its approach. When asked how she thought of her 'Jewish week', Flora Rendburg immediately responded: 'What I might do on Sunday, if I was running low, would be my *shabat* salads [...] I do make special salads which we only have on *shabat*, and there are three of those.'

Sabbath preparations took on their own ritual quality for some women, like Belinda Cohen:

On Friday afternoons I'm winding down my week. I have a ritual: I do the cooking in the morning, I usually go to the hairdresser [...] I come home, the table's set, I get everything ready, and I sort of feel I'm closing down

¹⁷³ These practices would not be acceptable in an Orthodox reading of *halakha*.

¹⁷⁴ Flora Rendburg, interview. Watching television on the sabbath, even if on a time switch and thus not technically violating sabbath laws prohibiting the operation of electrical appliances, would be viewed as inappropriate in mainstream Orthodox thought, while changing channels would be forbidden.

until *shabat*. I make a few phone calls to see how people are, catch up, and then there's a sort of quiet lull. I don't tend to do very much on a Friday afternoon, it's quite unusual if I do, maybe visit someone if they're not well, but mostly I'm just waiting for *shabat*.

The creation of personal rituals extends into the sabbath itself, as Katherine Marks described:

I really do light *shabat* candles on time, that's important to me. I like the idea that I'm going in the rhythm of the sun setting or whatever, and I will make enormous efforts to make sure that I'm home, and that's not such a small thing. It's got to be a different day for me, so I will put away the kettle, not because it's *muktseh* so much halakhically,¹⁷⁵ but just because that's part of my private ritual to put it away and then to get it out *motsa'ei shabat*.¹⁷⁶ I'm almost going *beyond* what I have to do there, but I do clear the kitchen of all appliances, not because I think I'm going to use them, but just because it will *remind* me that it will be *shabat*. Also, non-halakhic things like I don't bake, except I do bake on a Friday if I can, so that there is some fresh homemade something for *shabat* breakfast, because again *shabat* breakfast is a different meal. [...] I won't wear trousers on *shabat*, it wouldn't feel right. Now, what's that? That's not halakhic, that's not even metahalakhic, that's not even anything, but there are ways that I will remind myself that it's *shabat*.

Women often expressed a deep attachment to lighting sabbath candles, as did Shirley Daniels, who reflected on the sense of continuity with the biblical and more recent past that the ritual gave her: 'Sarah Imenu [the biblical matriarch Sarah] lit candles for *shabat* [...], we still do the same thing today, like my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother, we all did it, *erev shabat*, two of them, at that time.' However, not all women light candles, since in many families only the mother lights.¹⁷⁷

Sabbath observance was also one of the markers by which women measured their own religious position in comparison with that of their parents, and by means of which they expressed changes in their religious lives and identity. Several women spoke of an early desire to engage more deeply with *shabat* than their parents had, as

¹⁷⁵ *Muktseh*: a halakhic term referring to objects that cannot be used on the sabbath and therefore may not be handled.

¹⁷⁶ Lit.: 'the goings out of the sabbath', Saturday night after the end of the sabbath.

¹⁷⁷ See Sheyna Marcus' remarks on candle-lighting, Ch. 3.

did Katherine Marks, who ‘created a home which was *shomrei shabat* [sabbath observant]’ when she married, or Miriam Rothman:

[We] three daughters kept *shabat* more than Mum and Dad did, so for example very quickly we didn’t want to drive on *shabat*, or phone or anything like that, even though my parents still would if they were invited to a family bar mitzvah or whatever in London, they would drive. But we decided very quickly that we wouldn’t, and they were very supportive of that despite the ribbing, especially from my mother’s family, who were very *very* traditional, but very suspicious of over-enthusiastic religiosity.

A more recent, though less widespread, change can be seen in the gradual shift in some Modern Orthodox families to women performing some or all of the domestic sabbath rituals hitherto reserved for men, often alternating with their husbands. In several homes women now make the *hamotsi* blessing over the sabbath *halot*, particularly if they have baked them themselves, or they will take turns in reciting *kidush*, or, more rarely, *havdalah*; this is not something that they had seen their mothers doing, but the result of a family decision to alter traditional practice while respecting *halakhah* in order to give women a greater ritual role. For women like Keturah Allweiss, this is linked with a desire to provide their children with positive models of active, engaged women:

Usually on a Friday night I make *kidush* somehow, because we just ended up with that [...] and we encourage our children each to make *kidush*, it takes a long time on a Friday night, especially as now obviously the boys do it because they’re older, but now Rachel’s actually saying it along with me. [...] Rachel’s 6, and Margalit’s 3. So Margalit always says *bore peri hagafen* [the final blessing of *kidush*], but Rachel, she started to say *kidush* with me. And sometimes we give them their own *halot*, but always the same for the girls and the boys. And if we have three women and only two men, [my husband]’s always the one to say ‘*Nu*, are you going to do a women’s *mezuman*’,¹⁷⁸ and I sometimes do and I sometimes don’t, because if I have a woman who really would just wince at the thought of it, it’s not worth [it]. I don’t want to make people in my home feel uncomfortable, so I have to find that balance.

¹⁷⁸ *Mezuman* is the term for a halakhically defined group of three individuals who have eaten together, who add an introductory paragraph to the standard grace after meals (*birkat hamazon*). A wide range of halakhic opinions exists on whether three women eating together may or should constitute a *mezuman* group: see the discussion at <http://www.chaburas.org/zimun3.html>. In terms of current British practice, traditionalist and *haredi* women do not form a women’s *mezuman* in the presence of men (and generally not even when only women are present); a few Modern Orthodox families do so.

The majority of traditionalist women are unaware that women may perform such rituals according to *halakhah*. In contrast, *haredi* women actively expressed a lack of interest in performing rituals that they regarded as properly performed by men, even if they knew that halakhically they could perform them themselves; this may be partly in reaction to ‘outsider’ and feminist criticism of traditional Jewish women’s roles, and to a perception of women’s performance of these rituals as an aggressive ‘feminist statement’. Kate Moskovitz reacted defensively to my question about how she saw the role of Jewish women:

I just can’t think of anything that [my husband] does that I’m glad to do ... well, when he’s not around I can make *kidush* but I’m *very much* happier to give it over to one of my sons, which of course they would do, it would be a son doing it, but if they’re not there I would do it. I wouldn’t make *havdalah* though.

Women’s performance or non-performance of such home rituals has become something of a shibboleth in the Jewish community, with their participation instantly marking a family as Modern Orthodox and actively seeking change in women’s roles. Like Keturah Allweiss, I often experience this tension between accommodating traditionalist guests and upholding my own liberal halakhic position at sabbath meals; the conflicting pulls of community expectations and individual conviction are epitomized in this balancing act. The sabbath is a beloved source of spiritual and physical rest and recharging for Orthodox women, but it also provides both new opportunities for women to expand their ritual roles and sources of communal tension.

Food and kashrut

Food was often discussed in relation to the sabbath, with women emphasizing the central role that sabbath meals, particularly Friday night dinner, play in uniting and maintaining the family. Many families actively seek guests for sabbath and festival meals, especially those who live alone, the elderly, and travellers.¹⁷⁹ The elaborate network of reciprocal (and non-reciprocal) invitations to sabbath and festival meals is another dimension of the creation and maintenance of community networks,

¹⁷⁹ *Rebetsns* in particular are expected to host guests whom their husbands bring back from synagogue with no prior notice, and often regard this as a central religious duty.

embodied in women's activity. Women prize and regularly make traditional family recipes,¹⁸⁰ especially those associated with particular festivals, thus acting as guardians of family continuity. For Flora Rendburg,¹⁸¹ festivals (and even fasts) were principally defined by the 'correct' food:

I still make on festivals the same things that my mother would make, so for Rosh Hashanah we have the soup of seven vegetables, which we must have on Rosh Hashanah otherwise it isn't Rosh Hashanah, it has chickpeas, and all different root vegetables in it. And we'll have couscous on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and on Shavuot we have couscous, that's a tradition also. [...] I'm very particular, to start Tisha Be'av we must have split pea soup and hard-boiled eggs, and I make boiled potatoes, and we always break the fast on fried fish and grilled pepper and tomato salad.

Another food-related commandment performed principally by women is that of giving *mishlo'ah manot* at Purim;¹⁸² though equally incumbent on men and women, in practice it is usually women who prepare and package the food, with men often serving as delivery boys. Although the halakhic minimum for correct performance is to give two types of food to one individual, women from across the entire Orthodox spectrum often give large and elaborate food gifts to dozens of friends, frequently including homemade specialities. There is sometimes a perceptible air of competition, and the judging of reciprocal gifts is a fine art; food and its distribution form one of the arenas in which women compete for social and religious status. Some families deliberately avoid this temptation by giving the minimum food gift to one friend, and then distributing cards to other friends that record a donation made to a food charity on behalf of the recipient.

In many communities, especially *haredi* and young Modern Orthodox ones, women from the synagogue will organize ad hoc rotas for the supply of food to families who are sitting *shiva*,¹⁸³ or who have just had a new baby, usually for a week but longer if needed. This practice is significant to women on several levels: it is a practical form of community building, embodying women's perception of their role as maintaining and nourishing families and communities; it is an important part of the practical

¹⁸⁰ Some insisted on giving me detailed recipes during interviews.

¹⁸¹ Flora attached extra importance to food as a way of preserving her specific Gibraltar identity within a larger Jewish identity.

¹⁸² See Ch. 4.

¹⁸³ The week of intense mourning after a relative's death.

mitsvah of *hesed*, in which women are deeply involved, as well as part of the *mitsvah* of comforting mourners (*nihum avelim*); and it is a source of *zekhut* (merit).

In the complex and multifaceted preparation of food as a religious activity, London Orthodox women closely resemble the elderly Sefardi women of Jerusalem studied by Susan Starr Sered, who

as feeders of the hungry and the link between the generations, tie together the Jewish people, connecting the future with the past, the stranger with the friend, the rich with the poor, the biological kin with kin of a more mythical nature [...] the giving itself is a sacred act, one that makes them holy, puts them into closer contact with divinity.¹⁸⁴

For London women too, 'Food is central to the women's understanding of sacred time',¹⁸⁵ and like the Sefardi women, feeding family, friends, and strangers has a deep spiritual significance. Sarah Segal, a young hasidic mother, noted:

For example if I would squeeze [my son] out a carrot, for a drink, it's not that I'm just giving him a drink but I'm also giving [it to] somebody who's going to be doing something spiritual with that carrot juice inside him, so everything has that added dimension to it, because you know it's for a higher purpose really ... not that I think about that enough, but that's the thinking beneath everything.

However, unlike the elderly Sefardi women, and indeed their own grandmothers, London women are less confident and empowered in their *kashrut* practices. While Sered's informants told her that 'they never need to ask a rabbi questions involving *kashrut*; they already know everything that they need to know',¹⁸⁶ most women in London are far more dependent on male-administered and controlled systems of *kashrut* supervision, organized by the London Beth Din and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregation's Kedassia authority, and on the decisions and standards of rabbis. Classes on *kashrut*, taught by rabbis, are frequently run by United synagogues and educational institutions. Several different standards of *kashrut* are operative in the community, from the *haredi* insistence on rabbinic supervision of all prepared

¹⁸⁴ Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 93.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

(and some raw) food products (such as milk, sugar, and eggs¹⁸⁷), through Modern Orthodox and traditionalist reliance on the standards prescribed by the London Beth Din's food guide (which permits unsupervised milk and several other unsupervised products),¹⁸⁸ to a variety of personal interpretations among less observant traditionalists that include maintaining basic kosher standards at home but eating non-kosher food outside the house. The question of who will eat in whose house can become a major social issue, and women are very aware of this:

I shop for general groceries in supermarkets, but for what I call *Jewish* bits and pieces I buy only in Jewish shops, kosher shops. And I don't buy anything that is not kosher or supervised, in terms of like *cheese* or things like that, you know, people might say 'It's OK, it's vegetarian', I don't, so I hope I can have the rabbi into my home if he would come.¹⁸⁹

Standards have become increasingly strict in recent decades, with foods that were often not considered problematic earlier now being subject to regulation.¹⁹⁰ One woman told me 'there was no such thing as "kosher cheese" when I was growing up—we just ate ordinary cheese'. Several women remembered their parents' *kashrut* standards as considerably more lenient than their own, as did Katherine Marks:

My parents kept kosher in the home, but ate out,¹⁹¹ very occasionally would eat *treyf* out, but be very upset to do it in front of me. Occasionally on holiday there were sort of crises that I can remember.

'Keeping kosher' is a major feature of Jewish identity, and, along with sabbath observance, is one of the main areas in which people mark changes in their level of religiosity. Miriam Rothman noted:

I remember very clearly turning round to Mum at some point and saying 'Why don't we keep kosher? I want to keep kosher at home.' My father grew up kosher at home, with separate meat and milk and the rest of it, my mother

¹⁸⁷ Since bloodspots in eggs render them unkosher, many *haredi* women now buy only 'candled' eggs that have been checked for bloodspots.

¹⁸⁸ *The Really Jewish Food Guide*, produced annually. See <www.kosher.org.uk/aboutguide.htm> (accessed 17 July 2014).

¹⁸⁹ Belinda Cohen, interview.

¹⁹⁰ For instance, Martha Hubert's *Jewish Woman's Handbook* includes a mention of 'Flora margerine', an unsupervised product that was presumably acceptable in 1975 when the booklet was published, which has been obliterated with black felt pen in all the copies I have seen.

¹⁹¹ 'Eating out' in Anglo-Jewish parlance refers to eating in an unsupervised restaurant, whether it is vegetarian or serves non-kosher food such as pork and shellfish.

hadn't, but very quickly they thought 'Let's seize the moment'. It was something that I think they felt was right for them, and also because they wanted to *seize* that enthusiasm for Judaism and Jewish culture that we were starting to evince, and so with quite extraordinary alacrity they became kosher.

In this case, a daughter influenced her parents to become more observant, principally because of their desire to strengthen her Jewish identity rather than out of 'religious' conviction that this was commanded by God.

In another aspect of the intertwined nature of *kashrut* and Jewish identity, as different segments of the British Jewish community become more concerned with claiming their 'authenticity' (and denying that of other groups), *kashrut* increasingly becomes an arena where these claims are played out, with strictness of observance often equated with the 'authentic', and social pressure sometimes forcing women to alter their mimetically-learned practices. Not every woman is concerned about this, however, and there are still those, like Flora Rendburg, who place their family tradition above rabbinic authority. When I asked her whether she would consult anyone on questions of *kashrut*, she replied:

No. I do what my mother brought me up to do, and in those days one didn't look at the packets of biscuits, and there weren't kosher biscuits, and one bought normal biscuits. Obviously now one buys kosher biscuits because one can. For example, Christmas time I will buy the stuff from the Spanish shop that we always had at Christmas time, and they do it with olive oil, they do some with olive oil and some with lard, so I know which ones are which, and so I just buy them. I'm certainly not going to ask the rabbi and I'm not going to give them to him if he were to come round!

Lesley Sandman was troubled by the increasing involvement of the rabbinic establishment in matters that had traditionally been entrusted to women:

[The rabbis] don't trust women. I really feel that they give over to women things far too reluctantly. There's too much of the 'better you shouldn't, dearie' kind of phenomenon in Jewish life. Yes, it's much more convenient that all of our meat is *kashered*,¹⁹² but that came because they were worried. When I was first married in this country, you had to *kasher* your own meat.

¹⁹² While all meat must be slaughtered by a qualified *shohet* (slaughterer), the process of removing blood from the meat by salting and rinsing it, known as '*kashering*', may be performed by anybody familiar with the process.

End of story. And now it doesn't go out of the butcher's shop without being *kasher*. How many of the young girls know how to *kasher* meat, how to *kasher* liver, and how to tell if it is or it isn't? There are so many safeguards because 'well, they might not do it right'.

The partial loss of autonomy and the reduction in their religious roles entailed by the expansion of rabbinic authority in this field was also noted, a little wistfully, by Shirley Daniels:

Even today when I buy a chicken from the butcher and I stick it in my oven, I feel like I'm cheating. I feel like really there should be some process in between that I ought to be doing, and I do have a memory of my mother *kashering*, but you know my children will never have that. They'll never know what *kashering* was.

This sense of loss of autonomy and part of women's traditional role may contribute to the increasing emphasis on baking one's own *halot* that has spread in recent years. As noted in Chapter 4, the taking of *halah* during baking has recently become associated with acquiring merit to be used on others' behalf; in addition, influences from the wider, non-Jewish community have also had an effect. In a context where the middle classes value organic, 'natural', and homemade food, the traditional Jewish association of women with feeding and nurturing their families and communities receives strong social reinforcement, so that baking one's own *halot* becomes a highly symbolic activity, indicating a woman's commitment to traditional ideals, active acceptance of her maternal and nurturing role, and ability to acquire spiritual power. Following the usual pattern of women's accommodation to rabbinically-imposed limitations, little criticism is heard of the rabbis' curtailment of traditional women's activities in the realm of *kashrut*,¹⁹³ but instead women expand their activity by developing new practices or reviving and adapting older ones that have declined, such as *halah* baking. *Halot* are now baked as part of bat mitzvah celebrations and healing rituals,¹⁹⁴ and are promoted in women's classes: in July 2014 the Edgware branch of N'shei Chabad, a Lubavitch women's organization, ran three classes based on the 'women's *mitsvot*', collectively (and significantly) entitled

¹⁹³ Lesley Sandman and Shirley Daniels were the only women who talked about this.

¹⁹⁴ See Ch. 4, section on *halah* parties, and Ch. 6.

‘Powerhouse’.¹⁹⁵ The class concerned with *halah* baking, which promised that women would make *halah* and ‘learn its secrets’, was entitled ‘The Power behind the Dough’. Through this and other food-associated rituals, such as the *berakhah* parties discussed in Chapter 4, women celebrate and reassert their central role in the family and the community, and their desire to gain both spiritual power and closeness to God through preparing and serving food.

Passover

A particularly important time of food preparation and ritualization is Passover, which involves complicated and time-consuming preparations: no leavened food (*hamets*) may be consumed or owned during the eight-day festival, special pots, pans, crockery, and cutlery must be used, and the entire house, especially the kitchen, must be cleaned to ensure that not the tiniest crumb of *hamets* remains. Most Orthodox women, including several who are not particularly concerned about *kashrut* during the rest of the year, are seized by an overpowering urge to clean the entire house, even in areas where it is unlikely that *hamets* is present, and many go to extreme lengths in preparing for the festival—covering stoves, worktops, and walls with aluminium foil, cleaning out wardrobes, and repainting the kitchen.¹⁹⁶ This seems to have little to do with *halakhah*: every year, before the festival, rabbis run lectures on Passover preparation that seek to distinguish between what is halakhically necessary and some of the more extreme precautions that women take, in response to the extraordinary level of fervour that women display. The classes are not addressed to men, even if they assist with Passover preparation, as it is (rightly) assumed that in most houses it is the women who insist on the stringencies.¹⁹⁷ In spite of these rabbis’ attempts to lift some of the heavy burden of preparation from women, many are determined to follow the standards they have set themselves or inherited from

¹⁹⁵ EdgwareK email list, 20 July 2014. The family purity session was entitled ‘Channelling the Power’, and that on sabbath candles ‘Lighthouse’.

¹⁹⁶ The phenomenon exists in America and Israel too; see Rotem, ‘The Festival of Freedom?’; Fader, *Mitzvah Girls*, 26; and also Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 81, who notes that intensity of Passover cleaning is a ‘one of the most important measures of a pious woman’, and that ‘Jewish women have made a cult of Passover cleaning.’

¹⁹⁷ Though some pressure to add stringencies to existing customs may come from sources such as the glossy *haredi* family magazines like *Mishpachah* and *Binah*, produced in the USA but available in Britain. A recent edition of a *haredi* teenage magazine entitled *Aim!* (9 Nisan 2014) included an article listing twelve *humrot* (stringent customs) for Passover.

their own mothers, rather than follow the advice of a rabbi whose experience in the kitchen they perceive to be less than their own.

Sered notes that her elderly Sefardi informants saw the weeks of cleaning as a deeply spiritual process, and sensed ‘God’s presence helping them carry out their Passover preparations’, which included sorting through all the rice to be used on the festival seven times, grain by grain. She concluded that ‘Passover laws of cleaning and food preparation give spiritual meaning and legitimization to their everyday, female activities’, ‘mak[ing] sacred women’s entire profane domain: the domain of sinks, buckets, mops, and rags’.¹⁹⁸ None of the women to whom I talked felt this way about Passover preparations, about which they spoke with a very real sense of dread and worry; Flora Rendburg even spoke of the festival as ‘the P word’, jokingly equating it with something obscene or too terrible to be named. Katherine Marks witnessed her mother’s ambivalent feelings about the festival:

I know she found Pesah an *enormous* hardship, and I remember her saying ‘What am I doing this for?’ at one point, when she was sweeping out a cupboard in the middle of the night or whatever, ‘What am I doing this for?’, and we’ve all asked that, but I always felt for *her*, she really didn’t like it or even believe in it or really see much value in it, so she *really* was asking that question, but having said that it would absolutely not occur to her not to do it.

The simultaneous dread of the weeks of hard physical labour and the insistence on doing things the way they have always been done or adding even more precautions are very common, regardless of age: ‘I don’t particularly enjoy the buildup to Pesah but most women don’t’, said Sheyna Marcus. Other women complained the preparations wore them out, so that they were too exhausted to enjoy the Seder on the first night of Passover. The only woman who spoke positively of preparing for the festival, Stella James, was recalling the excitement of childhood:

But when I was little I *adored* Seder, I adored all the preparation. Both of my parents were working in their own family business—and *I* was the one, when it was time to start changing everything over, and getting the crockery, I was the one that used to do it, and I remember one year when we were about to start, I just got the whole lot out and did virtually all of it,

¹⁹⁸ Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 83.

before my mother was even ready to start, because I was just so excited by the whole thing.

Like Simhat Torah,¹⁹⁹ Passover is a time of tension and resentment for many Orthodox women, perhaps because, in spite of their hard work in preparation, the running of the ‘payoff’—the Seder ceremony—is very often completely in the hands of men, especially in *haredi* and traditionalist families. In many Modern Orthodox families women now recite parts of the Hagadah, the Seder text, and make their own contributions to the traditional discussion and explication; these are often the families in which men participate in food and Passover preparations on a more egalitarian basis, perhaps reducing the sense of resentment and dread of Passover preparation. In a few instances new feminist rituals, such as the introduction of a ‘Miriam’s Cup’ to match the traditional ‘Elijah’s Cup’,²⁰⁰ have been adopted or at least tried, as in Stella James’ family:

I did start a few years ago introducing things like Miriam’s Cup of water, and all sorts of slightly feminine type of things, and now I lead grace after meals, at our Seder, and I’d *never* have been allowed to do such a thing, even if I’d been able to, which I wouldn’t have been, when my grandfather was alive, he wouldn’t have liked that at all. But as it happens, some of these things have kind of gone by the board now, because they’re too new, and they haven’t stuck, Miriam’s Cup hasn’t stuck actually.

In a traditionalist family, innovative practices cannot fulfil the function of confirming and reinforcing identity, since they have no link with the past. However, the desire to reclaim Jewish women as part of Jewish history and continuity can move even someone as devoted to preserving her family customs as Flora Rendburg, who thought it was important to make women visible in the Seder:

If I find something that I think is meaningful, for example Miriam’s Cup on Pesah, which I’m a big fan of—things that *show* where women have played a part; and I think it’s really important, particularly in Orthodox circles, to promulgate that. Because I think a lot of the time we’re taught—certainly *I* was taught—you know, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joseph, Aaron. We’re not *really* taught about what *women* did and how important their role is.

¹⁹⁹ See Ch. 3.

²⁰⁰ Miriam’s Cup is a new ritual developed in the USA in the late 1980s; see Levy, ‘The Orange on the Seder Plate and Miriam’s Cup’.

While *haredi* women generally accept their preparatory role at Passover as another opportunity to serve their family and enable them to perform *mitsvot*, a necessary component of the process of moulding a pious self, many women in the non-*haredi* sector seem to be tired of this auxiliary role, and some are seeking to add a more active participation in the ‘rewarding’ aspects of Passover.

Mikveh and ‘family purity’

Having explored women’s experience of sabbath and food preparation, areas associated with the first two of the three ‘women’s *mitsvot*’, we will now turn to an investigation of how women experience and understand the third *mitsvah*, the regulations governing sexual activity known as the ‘family purity’ system. Though details of the halakhic rules and rituals are easily accessible,²⁰¹ this is obviously a very personal and intimate subject for women, and has traditionally been included in the feminine ideal of *tzeni’ut*, ‘modesty’, which eschews open discussion of sexual matters. Consequently, very few women mentioned the subject, and my principal source of information was an interview with Shirley Daniels, a young mother who has worked as a *mikveh* [ritual bath] attendant for several years and gives ‘*kalah* [bride] classes’, training sessions for brides-to-be. She was very open, and freely discussed both positive and negative experiences of the system.

While all married *haredi* women and probably most Modern Orthodox women visit the *mikveh* and observe the halakhic regulations, a surprisingly high proportion of traditionalist women do not, or only go before their wedding.²⁰² One woman noted:

When I got married we went to the *mikveh* during the day and we took my mum’s best friend and my best friend, and we had chocolates afterwards. Because it’s a big deal. I’ve not ever been since. It’s not something that [my husband] wanted me to do and I’ve never felt that I wanted to do it.²⁰³

²⁰¹ See Wasserfall, *Women and Water*; Kaplan, *Waters of Eden*.

²⁰² Since these practices are of biblical origin and are as important as sabbath and *kashrut* observance in halakhic terms, I would suggest that the low rates of performance are the result of the strongly assimilationist trend in Anglo-Jewry during the early 20th century, when many traditional practices were viewed as ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’ and were discouraged or abandoned.

²⁰³ Since the subject is so private I have omitted the pseudonyms used to identify interviewees in this section as an extra measure of anonymity.

Other women also mentioned that their mothers had never been to the *mikveh*, and this seems to have been very common among traditionalist Ashkenazi women for several decades, as confirmed by Shirley Daniels:

From the Spanish and Portuguese community, the Sefardi community, it tends to be that 90 percent and above brides go to the *mikveh* before they get married, irrespective of their background and religious knowledge and Jewish practice, because culturally that's what they do. And in the United Synagogue the percentages were historically much lower, and they've worked very hard, to the point where in the last year they've got between 95 and 100 percent, depending on the month, attendance of brides. They've made a massive department in the United Synagogue to enable that to happen. So I think that if you look at Anglo-Jewry as a whole, you're getting 95 percent plus of brides per year going to *mikveh* before marriage ... but [after marriage] the community who are not that observant, where it's still a question mark as to 'Will I', I think the Sefardi community have a higher uptake because knowledge and religious practice don't go hand in hand, whereas in the Ashkenazi community knowledge and practice are more equal to one another.

Shirley observed very different attitudes to the practice among Sefardi and Ashkenazi women, unrelated to their level of religious observance in other areas:

The Central London *mikveh*, which is based in Maida Vale, has a huge corps of regular [Sefardi] attenders who turn up in boots and jeans and low-cut tops, not covering their hair, not going to kosher restaurants, maybe not even keeping a kosher home at all either, but keeping *taharat hamishpahah*, not just doing a *mikveh*, but actually saying the Sefardi *tefilot* [prayers] during the month coming to the *mikveh*, saying additional *tehilim* [psalms], doing the *bedikahs*,²⁰⁴ making sure that their preparation is completely *kasher*, and finding it a very wonderful spiritual experience.

While halakhic regulations shape every stage of the ritual, there is also room for family custom and individual preferences, often with symbolic value:

Standard Ashkenazi custom is to do either two dips with no family history,²⁰⁵ one dip *berakhah*²⁰⁶ another dip; if there's a family custom to do three dips, it would be dip *berakhah* two dips, and then for Sefardim, more will do three than two [dips], and often seven. I've seen it split different ways, I've seen it be a dip, a *berakhah* and six more dips; I've seen it be

²⁰⁴ Literally 'checks', halakhically prescribed internal examinations to ensure that menstrual bleeding has completely ceased for seven days before *mikveh* immersion.

²⁰⁵ i.e. no special tradition from one's family.

²⁰⁶ 'Blessing'; a formal blessing is recited during immersion, between 'dips'.

three dips, a *berakhah* and four more dips, and there are interesting people who come with 13, 15, or 18 [dips]. [Some] people say *pesukim* [biblical verses] in between each dip, [there are] people who recite certain *tehilim* before and certain *tehilim* afterwards. I think the majority of people go, dip, come out. [...] The seven for Sefardim—seven is a very spiritual, deep, heavy number, I suppose that 13 is as well,²⁰⁷ and 18 for *hai*,²⁰⁸ there are connotations with these numbers, but seven is very mystical, and I think of seven days of the week, seven times around the *hatan*,²⁰⁹ you know, and I do think that there's something beautiful about that, for Sefardim that I know, they talk about it that way.²¹⁰

Some women find visiting the *mikveh* stressful and uninspiring, particularly if they have not been taught about the spiritual dimensions of the practice; the inadequate and insensitive character of many *kalah* classes was noted in the 1994 Preston Report, with women commenting that 'The attitude that, unless a woman can keep the commandment in every particular—she is negating the whole process, is a damaging approach.'²¹¹ The same report recorded complaints that *mikvaot* were often 'dirty and dilapidated', with 'prying and unsympathetic attendants', and that women were not consulted in the planning process for building new *mikvaot*.²¹² In a few cases, women's compliance with the 'family purity' system has been encouraged by the use of threats; the Preston Report noted an instance where literature given to future brides included "a veiled threat of cervical cancer" if the laws of family purity were not followed',²¹³ and in a north-west London synagogue, a respected rabbi asserted in a sabbath sermon that women who do not observe this commandment run the risk of giving birth to mentally deficient or criminal children, prompting a Modern Orthodox midwife to stand up in the ladies' gallery and yell 'That's not true!'²¹⁴

Both the physical standards of *mikvaot* and the sensitivity of the *kalah* teachers seem to have improved in the last couple of decades, possibly as a result of the Preston Report: luxurious new *mikvaot* have been built, old ones have been revamped, and

²⁰⁷ 13 is associated with the number of God's attributes.

²⁰⁸ The numerical value (*gematriyah*) of *hai* ('life') is 18; charity is often given in multiples of 18.

²⁰⁹ Many Ashkenazi brides follow the custom of walking 7 times around the groom under the bridal canopy, a practice associated with protection.

²¹⁰ Shirley Daniels, interview.

²¹¹ Goodkin and Citron, *Women in the Jewish Community*, 43.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Reported to me by the midwife.

the United Synagogue now runs a ‘Marriage Enhancement Programme’ with trained *kalah* teachers as well as individual male teachers for grooms.²¹⁵ Other problems cannot be so easily dealt with. For some *haredi* women, for instance, their lifelong education in the importance of *tseni’ut* can make going to the *mikveh* a traumatic experience:

[There was] a young bride who’s been married for a few years and hasn’t had any children yet and wasn’t taught properly, and I just retaught her. [She] was brought up in the *frum* community, and this concept of being *tsanua* [modest] was imbued in every area of her life, and then [she was] shoved to go to Golders Green *mikveh*, where it’s basically a communal waiting room,²¹⁶ and she just freaked out about it and felt *so* uncomfortable, really worried and upset about knowing that it was coming up to her time to go, because of that experience of it, not necessarily the *mikveh*, but just the discrepancy between being *tsanua* and everyone knowing your business. And her attitude was ‘My biggest fear would be that I’m going to see my *mother*, and that she’d know where we’re at’. That was sad. Sad because it doesn’t have to be like that. So obviously I taught her, and I told her about three other *mikvehs* where you don’t have any communal waiting, and it really really helped.

Shirley also reported that ‘there are people in the community who have issues, whether it be a phobia or a fear [... or] they feel that it’s a barbaric custom, or they feel that it’s completely improper’. A young Modern Orthodox woman who was completely committed to the observance of this *mitsvah* noted that there were times when it became very difficult for her:

There have been times when *mikveh* hasn’t been easy. Due to having been in hospital, I had a line in my arm and of course I managed to get my period while I was in hospital. And because I had this line in my arm I ended up being in *nidah* [ritually impure] for three months. I had no use of my right side, I couldn’t get dressed, so to then be in *nidah* was also really doubly traumatic, because I couldn’t help myself, I needed assistance and [my husband] couldn’t do that for me at all,²¹⁷ and I *really hated* God, I *hated* rabbis, and I *hated* religion, religious practice, for putting another stumbling

²¹⁵ <<http://www.theus.org.uk/article/marriage-enhancement-programme-mep>> (accessed 22 July 2014).

²¹⁶ While actual immersion is performed in a room containing a *mikveh* with only the attendant present, after preparation in an individual bathroom with a door opening directly to the *mikveh* room, many *mikveh* buildings have a communal waiting room where a dozen or more women may sit while waiting for a bathroom to be free.

²¹⁷ Full observance of *taharat mishpahah* precludes any physical contact or passing of objects between husband and wife while she is in a state of *nidah*. One new bride confided to me that she found these restrictions almost impossible to bear, though she had no problems about going to the *mikveh*.

block before me from my recovery, I was *really* angry about it and I found it very difficult to be apart. But then once it was out and I could go to *mikveh*, it felt wonderful.

In spite of this, she still experienced the practice as something deeply spiritual:

There are other times where I'm euphoric that I have this *mitsvah* in my life that allows me to have this connection in my life to *hakadosh barukh hu* [God],²¹⁸ and other times it's about the practicalities, can I be together with my husband, can we pass things to each other [...] Yes, it's difficult with young children to do the preparation and get out the house and find the time when it's all busy busy, but if I didn't have it I'd be really sad.

From her experience as a *mikveh* attendant, Shirley felt that most women enjoyed visiting the *mikveh* and found it both a pleasant and a spiritual experience:

People love the time it gives them to be on their own, to come away from the rigours of daily life, the demands of email and telephone and constant communication. They enter the *mikveh*, they turn whatever they've got on, off, put it on pause and silent, and they step away from their life, and they sink into a bathtub, and they relax, and they go through their preparation working towards a moment of connection with Hashem [God] and water. [...] I see people coming out of the water and crying, specially brides, who didn't know it was going to be like that [...] I try to educate the girls when they're at the bridal level, that they're in the middle of doing a *mitsvah* when they're in the water, and that they should take a moment to stop, to pause. Yes, you've done your quantity [of dips], so you've got your preparation, your thinking process over, you've done your dips and the counting is over, but you're still in the water. Take a moment—it's like standing under the *hupah* [bridal canopy] still, you're surrounded by the *shekhinah* [Divine Presence] of Hashem and therefore you've got the opportunity to connect, and to try and do that, open up your heart and your soul and ask for the things you want, give thanks for the things that you have, and show that level of appreciation and communication.

Shirley speaks of an opportunity both for personal time and space and for communication with the divine, which can transform a set of physical practices mandated by *halakhah* into an intensely female, embodied ritual that ushers a woman into the presence of God. While not all women experience *mikveh* and its associated practices in this way, it is clear that for many Orthodox women it provides a unique, and uniquely female, dimension of spirituality that they treasure.

²¹⁸ 'The Holy One, blessed be He', a common name for God.

Modesty

Modesty (*tzeni'ut*), a central Jewish value encountered above in the discussion of *mikveh*, is a non-gendered concept that applies to all behaviour: dress, speech, deportment, lifestyle, and social relationships. However, as currently used in much of the Orthodox community, it is generally restricted to women's dress and behaviour, and is often spoken of as though it is only relevant to women, who are regarded as responsible for ensuring that men are not aroused by them. In the *haredi* community throughout the world, calamities and accidents are often blamed by prominent rabbis on women's lack of *tzeni'ut*, with *haredi* women responding by urging each other to don longer skirts, thicker stockings, and higher necklines in order to prevent cancer, missile attacks on Israel, and road accidents.²¹⁹ Standards are constantly getting stricter: *haredi* publications will not carry pictures of women (however they are dressed), a modesty hotline has been set up in Stamford Hill for the reporting of 'breaches of decency',²²⁰ and there is a steady stream of new literature designed to teach women what they may and may not wear.²²¹ Modesty has become the defining feature of the *haredi* woman—'Tzenius is as integral to the woman as Torah and Talmud study is to the man'²²²—while also being deployed by men to control women and use them as scapegoats.

Traditionalist and most Modern Orthodox women disregard most of this recent modesty discourse, wearing what they deem is suitable for the social context. Trousers, however, are a particularly sensitive issue, with women often defining their own level of observance (or that of someone else) by noting whether they do or do not wear trousers; it would be a major *faux pas* to wear them to synagogue or to a religious event.²²³ Traditionalist and older Modern Orthodox married women usually wear hats to synagogue, but do not cover their hair elsewhere; more observant,

²¹⁹ <<https://www.evernote.com/pub/freddy55/tzniuscraziness#st=p&n=a2aa947a-bf48-4f25-ae54-3f6a00b57c1a>> (accessed 22 July 2014). See also El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*, 193-200 for a discussion of the modesty discourse among Israeli *haredim*.

²²⁰ Rucker, 'Modesty Hotline Launched by London Rabbis'.

²²¹ e.g. Falk, *Modesty: An Adornment for Life*, which displays an almost obsessive level of interest in the covering of women's bodies. For a recent 'checklist' of modest behaviour for women circulated in Stamford Hill, see <<http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/.a/6a00d83451b71f69e201a73df2def6970d-pi>> (accessed 24 July 2014).

²²² Osgood, 'After Years of Delay'.

²²³ e.g. Katherine Marks' comment above, in the section on the sabbath, or a United Synagogue woman visiting Bushey cemetery: 'I am dressed in trousers and will not visit [my parents'] grave', see Francis, Kellaher, and Neophtou, *Secret Cemetery*, 110.

generally younger Modern Orthodox women may wear a scarf or hat. Wigs are most commonly worn by *haredi* women, though some Modern Orthodox women may wear them, particularly if they work in a non-Jewish environment and do not wish to stand out. As in all Jewish communities, the social significance of women's hair covering (or lack of it) is complex and important.²²⁴

Few interviewees raised issues of modesty: the 'ground rules' on dress for each part of the community are obvious to all, and few women deliberately break them. Even *haredi* women did not refer to the current rabbinic discourse on modesty, much less express interest in or acceptance of it. However, the importance of modesty as a behavioural ideal, as well as a code of dress, was explored in some depth by a young, single interviewee who defined herself as 'between *haredi* and Modern Orthodox'. In spite of the rabbinic focus on a narrowly-defined concept of *tzeni'ut* and the disastrous consequences of neglecting the (male-determined) rules, Sheyna Marcus understood modesty as part of the ideal of Jewish womanhood to which she aspired, but defined it as part of her personal spiritual self-formation and refinement.²²⁵

In the morning [on the sabbath] I'm quite *makpid* [strict] on getting to *shul* quite early. I don't like to get there at the same time as the men for a couple of reasons, one for *tzni'us* reasons, to be the one woman amongst thirty men may not be the right thing to do, and also, second reason is because I don't want to really ... embarrass men—let's say some members of my family may not be so good at time-keeping, and it looks bad on them if their woman—their female person in their family gets to *shul* before them, I think that looks bad on them specially since there's no *hiyuv* [obligation] for a woman to be in *shul*, however nice it might be. I like to be in *shul* within 10 minutes of its start.

In addition to her concern that she might arrive simultaneously with the men, thus perhaps encountering them inappropriately in the entrance hall before she entered the women's section,²²⁶ Sheyna takes great pains to avoid 'embarrassing' her male relations by arriving before them, thus implying criticism (either by herself or by other, male observers), even at the risk of arriving later than she would personally

²²⁴ See Carrel, 'Hasidic Women's Head Coverings'.

²²⁵ Cf. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*. See also El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*, 177-9, on the personal, though socially contextualized, construction of modesty.

²²⁶ The inappropriateness would be because she would be the only woman there and thus unavoidably conspicuous.

prefer. Such delicacy of feeling would probably not be reciprocated by the men, who would be unaware of her presence once she is sitting in the women's section, but exemplifies the agency she exerts in forming herself in accordance with Jewish ideals, which stress the seriousness of embarrassing others.²²⁷ Her understanding of *tseni'ut* in relation to dress revealed a similar ethical, rather than mechanical, interpretation of this ideal:

One of the only things actually that I don't think I ever find too much of a bind is *tsni'us*. I find that quite easy. And I'm quite strict on myself. I'm not Rav [Rabbi] Falk,²²⁸ I don't go quite as far as that, I feel that you need to use your initiative a bit, and you shouldn't need to be told about bending down and your neckline perhaps being shown. You should know on your own what's too tight, you should know on your own what colours might be too promiscuous, you should know on your own which hairstyles are not [suitable]—not just neck, elbow, knee, what *tsni'us* is really about. [...] If *tsni'us* is about, in some way, being inconspicuous, then my personality is generally I don't enjoy being the centre of attention, so that it's not difficult for me to do that. [...] I think that people need to be true to themselves, and they also need to use their own initiative and their own feeling—yeah, there are guidelines, but it's about you rather than about rules.

By internalizing this central religious value and developing her own responsibility for embodying and interpreting it in her daily life, Sheyna sidesteps the strident male discourse on women's modesty, with its emphasis on 'rules' and its agenda of control and blame, and recreates the practice as her own, serving as her own authority and displaying agency in her choice to interpret the associated restrictions and train herself to observe them. As has been noted in the discussion of other women's practices, from *berakhah* parties to food preparation, women often understand and perform elements of their religious lives in ways that are quite different from how male religious authorities understand them.

Visiting the dead

As guardians of the home, women are viewed as particularly responsible for maintaining family links, and this continues after death. Though both men and women visit family graves, women in particular maintain a relationship with

²²⁷ The Talmud compares embarrassing a person in public to murder; see BT *Bava metsia* 58a-59b.

²²⁸ The author of the work on women's dress mentioned above, n. 57.

deceased members of the family, especially their mothers, consulting them about problems or reporting family news to them when they stand at the tomb. It is customary to visit family graves either in the month of Ellul,²²⁹ or between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: a survey carried out at Bushey, a large United Synagogue cemetery north of London, on the Sunday before Yom Kippur 1996 recorded 2,859 visitors, of whom women formed 50.2%.²³⁰ Visitors aged 45-65 were the largest group (40%), while those aged 65 and older constituted about 31%. In contrast, a comparative survey carried out on an ordinary Thursday in October 1996 listed only 262 visitors, of whom 52% were women.

While numbers of men and women were more or less equal, interviews conducted with some visitors revealed different emphases in men's and women's visits. Women spoke more often of coming to the cemetery in order to communicate with the dead:

When there is anything momentous in the family, I come: births, marriage, an upset. It is a mark of respect to go there, it is making an effort on her behalf. It is easy to have a conversation [with the deceased] at home; I do not have to be dressed, I do not have to put on make-up. The cemetery requires special effort; it is not en route to anywhere. It is an offering, an effort to go.²³¹

I have things on my mind and I want to talk to my mother and to ask her help. [...] I come for her guidance, to get outside help ... and I ask her to sort it out. I'll ask her to give me a sign—like breaking a good plate. Even if it's not related, I make it so that it is. I feel better when I talk to her; she's the only one I might talk to about this.²³²

Both men and women came to inform the dead about births, marriages, and deaths, and two women who were both thinking of remarrying told the interviewers that they had come to tell their dead spouses, but hoped to receive approval at their mothers' graves.²³³ In addition, several women spoke of carrying on regular conversation with their dead mothers at home.²³⁴ Others feel the connection particularly strongly when engaged in religious rituals: 'On lighting the Friday night candles, I welcome the

²²⁹ The month before Rosh Hashanah, a time of preparation for the major festivals.

²³⁰ This information and the quotations below appear in Francis, Kellaheer, and Neophtou, *Secret Cemetery*.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²³² *Ibid.*, 151.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

light and all the people I knew who have passed on—I expect them to be there [...] I need their approval. The fact that they're dead is not important to me.²³⁵

The same picture emerged from my interview material, with women listing cemetery visits as 'part of their Jewish year'. Flora Rendburg visits several cemeteries, including both relatives and community members in her rounds, in a combination of 'chat' and prayer:

I go on my father's—we call it *nahalah*, not *yortsayt*,²³⁶ I go on my father's *nahalah*, and I go on Lag Ba'omer,²³⁷ which are a week apart, so that's very exciting, and I go before Rosh Hashanah. I don't go any other time [...] So I've done Hoop Lane, I've got a stone-setting at 4 in Bushey, in between that I'm going to Edgwarebury Lane,²³⁸ that's our other cemetery [...] when I go to Hoop Lane, if I go for a stone-setting or whatever I always go to my dad and my uncle and my dad's best friend, and as it happens on the way to my dad there's a *whole load* of people from [my synagogue], so I have to say hello to them as I go by. [...] Sometimes I have a chat, I don't talk to my dad all that much. [...] So I take the prayerbook with me, and usually I'll say the prayer for visiting the cemetery, and sometimes I'll say *kadish*, to myself,²³⁹ but today the page I happened to open it up was at *heshkavah*,²⁴⁰ so I thought that's obviously the page that I'm supposed to read today. I'm not that fussed to go with the rabbi and him say *heshkavah* for me. If I want to say it I can say it myself.

When the authors of the cemetery survey asked Rabbi Ivan Binstock, a *dayan* [judge] of the London Beth Din, to comment on the purpose and nature of Jewish cemetery visits, he gave a very different view, telling them that 'reflection on life values in presence of the dead' is underlain by 'the religious tenet that the worthy lives of bereaved survivors—inspired and influenced by the teachings and proper deeds of their deceased parents—can confer an enhanced spiritual status upon the souls of the departed', and explaining that 'according to this belief, the living can redeem the

²³⁵ Ibid., 90.

²³⁶ Anniversary of death. *Yortsayt* is the (Yiddish) Ashkenazi term, *nahalah* the Sefardi one.

²³⁷ The 33rd day of counting the *omer*, a sequence of 49 days, each counted with a blessing, from Passover to Shavuot.

²³⁸ Hoop Lane cemetery, Golders Green, serves the Reform and Spanish and Portuguese (Orthodox) communities; Edgwarebury cemetery serves the Reform, Liberal, Masorti, and Spanish and Portuguese communities.

²³⁹ According to *halakhah*, *kadish* may only be recited in the presence of a male *minyan*, so this is a non-halakhic individual practice that accords well with other situations in which Flora preferred her own judgement to seeking rabbinic permission or authority (see above).

²⁴⁰ Standard Hebrew: *hashkavah*—the Sefardi memorial prayer. Texts for female and male versions may be found at <<http://www.jewish-funeral-guide.com>> (accessed 24 July 2014).

dead, their activities enabling the passage of the soul to a higher realm.’ While the rabbi saw cemetery visits as a source of merit for the dead, derived from the virtuous deeds of their descendants, the women interviewed understood visits as a prolongation of the pre-existing relationship with relations and friends; they initiated communication with the dead in order to receive the help, advice, and approval of their beloved family members. In this instance too, women’s understandings of their religious activities differ markedly from that of the rabbinic elite.

Prayer and relationship with God

Many Jewish women are shy about discussing belief, spirituality, and personal philosophy, especially with a stranger, or may never have spent time examining their beliefs or constructing a coherent belief system; if questioned, they are often embarrassed at their uncertainty or the inconsistent nature of what they believe. This made it hard to ask women direct questions about such issues, but the subject did emerge in less obvious ways. As a Jewish studies teacher I am often asked theological or philosophical questions by women who lead an unimpeachable Orthodox lifestyle but preface their questions with apologetic disclaimers such as ‘Of course I’m a terrible *apikoros* [heretic], but I wondered ...’ or ‘I’m afraid this is a really stupid question, but do we believe ...’. I have drawn on this material as well as interviews in the discussion that follows.

About half my interviewees, including all the *haredi* women, said they prayed on a daily basis, usually at home rather than in synagogue. Not all of them, however, felt secure in their faith or their relationship with God. Bernice Susser, who did not pray except in synagogue (where prayer ‘very rarely touched’ her), had experienced several tragedies in her life, and explained that ‘my own personal faith peaks and troughs, but I’m very profoundly Jewish all the way through, and it’s very much part of my essence’. Suffering was also cited by Flora Rendburg as a factor in her relationship to the divine: ‘I have had quite a crisis of faith, because of all that happened with my friend’s family, and then [several relations] having breast cancer’, but like Bernice, this did not affect either her religious practice or her sense of Jewishness: ‘It’s very hard, but I suppose I don’t know what’s the most important thing—I suppose keeping the traditions going, keeping everything going ... and

being part of something that's different, that's not what everybody else does. It must be important if it's different and it's been different for so many years.'

Flora did not see a 'crisis of faith' as a reason to stop praying: 'I always say *modeh ani* when I get up,²⁴¹ and I always say Shema just before I fall asleep [...] I don't tend to say *berakhot* during the day.'²⁴² Some women, like Beatrice Levi, adopted a particular prayer practice rather than reciting the formal services from the prayerbook, even though she too was ambivalent about 'religion':

A woman at school told me I have to say *asher yatsar*,²⁴³ so I say that when I can remember, when I've been to the toilet. But I have to be honest—I feel like I'm probably the furthest away from religion that I've ever been in my life now, from feeling any closeness to religion, I actually feel quite disconnected, apart from the fact that I'm actually working at a religious school. Basically I can do the ritual, and I know everything, because I've been taught, and I know how to do everything, but I don't really feel it.

Her feelings were echoed by other traditionalist women. Even women who did pray regularly and had no doubts about their faith acknowledged that prayer is not always easy: Sheyna Marcus noted that 'you can have high points and you can have times when it says nothing to you and you can't be bothered', and Sarah Segal, from the Satmar hasidic community, after emphasizing that prayer was very important to her, explained that it was:

not just from the *sidur* [prayerbook], though, it can be just by talking as well. I strongly believe in having an honest relationship with God, very honest. Sometimes it's difficult but, once I feel I can't pray, I just can't say it, I just don't feel in a place to pray, but praying is a big part [...] whenever something goes wrong, or I need something, I need a bit extra, or thanking ... I think it's very meaningful for women particularly.

Several women felt the need to incorporate prayer into their daily routine in a regular way, making individual choices of what to say from the prayerbook. Katherine Marks described the way in which she links parts of the formal prayers to her own life:

²⁴¹ A brief prayer upon waking.

²⁴² The blessings before and after eating or drinking.

²⁴³ The blessing after going to the lavatory.

I always felt that it was just second best doing it at home, but I also decided that it was better for me to *davn* at home than to go to *shul* and actually come out really feeling upset, depressed, alienated. [...] I don't particularly feel obligated to do everything, so I do edited highlights that mean things to me [...] Not a week goes by when I'm not teaching a class or preparing a class, so [Torah study] is very much in my consciousness, and I really really like that. [...] *la'asok bedivrei torah* is a very very important *berakhah* for me,²⁴⁴ [...] the idea of being immersed and of that being part of my life is very very important, I think it's become very important because I've not been able to find fulfilment in so many other aspects of Judaism, which have just not worked for me.

When frustrated by the communal aspect of Judaism, especially its limitations on women's participation, Katherine finds consolation and meaning in private prayer. Others, like Shirley Daniels, spoke of the uplifting and intensifying effect music had on their experience of prayer, transporting them to a level beyond that of mere words:

I still remember a Yom Kippur service [...] and the *hazan* [cantor] from Israel was just phenomenal, the best *hazan* I've ever heard. It wasn't like *hazanut*,²⁴⁵ it was just so powerful and emotional, and that tune was used over *again* and *again* and *again*, and I can't help but when somebody else uses that in the *tefilah* but feel like I've been opened up and connect with the *tefilot* [prayers] on a different level, it's an emotional and spiritual level maybe, I don't know, but it's not about the *words*, it's about the feeling.

Her words were echoed by Miriam Rothman, explaining what she found attractive in the Grassroots services she had helped to organize:

It was unapologetic about being spiritually involving, uplifting, there was no shame or embarrassment about being *really involved* and uplifted by the *davning* and the singing, and it was that transportive quality of music and of *davning* which I hadn't really had since I'd been in Israel.

Several United Synagogue members spoke with frustration of the dull and alienating experience of prayer in their synagogues, and many spoke yearningly of this rare sensation of being swept up in prayer, which they often described as 'spirituality', or

²⁴⁴ One of the three morning blessings over Torah study; this one refers to God's command to 'be busy with' or 'immerse oneself in' words of Torah.

²⁴⁵ The cantorial style of prayer, sometimes very florid and elaborate.

‘a spiritual atmosphere’,²⁴⁶ and which the women who founded and ran the Stanmore Women’s Tefilah Group saw as the aim of their services.²⁴⁷ The deep desire for spiritual growth and connection to the divine, expressed by many of the women, was expressed by Sheila Dorfman, along with a simultaneous fear of its transformative possibilities:

If I could change my religious life I think I would to learn and practise religious meditation, and really find that space in myself that really wants to connect with God. And I think it’s quite threatening and it’s quite challenging and that’s probably why I don’t do it, there’s no reason why I couldn’t do it, it’s just a very difficult place to go. There’s a book called *Praying with Fire*,²⁴⁸ and they gave away a little booklet of it a couple of Rosh Hashanahs ago as a sort of taster, and I started reading it, it’s one of these 5 minutes a day things, and I couldn’t continue because I found it too threatening, it was wonderful but it would take me to a different place and I’m not sure that I’m ready to go there, but I would like to be in a place that I *would* like to go there.

Many traditionalist and some Modern Orthodox women are insecure and feel lost in this dimension of their religious lives, longing to deepen their faith and develop a meaningful spiritual life, but unsure how to go about it, and doubtful that their religious leaders can provide direction. They are uncertain as to what they think about much of the ‘official’ belief system, as defined in Maimonides’ ‘Thirteen Principles’,²⁴⁹ for example, and about issues such as the afterlife or the effectiveness of prayer. In particular, they have trouble reconciling Western rational and scientific patterns of thought and traditional Jewish ideas. *Haredi* women like Kate Moskovitz were prepared to sacrifice Western thought (‘logic’) if it posed a threat to traditional Jewish ideas:

When I think of it *logically* these things are nuts, right? When I think of it logically, if you put *logic* into this thing, then it doesn’t make sense. You wouldn’t believe in anything. That’s why I don’t like scientists in a way, they’re trying to make it [logical]—I can’t get this science thing—because once you start trying to make it into logic it’s like chalk and cheese, because

²⁴⁶ See Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, ch. 2, for a detailed analysis of the use of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ both in the academy and in ‘everyday life’.

²⁴⁷ See Ch. 4.

²⁴⁸ I could not identify this; it might be Hershey Kleinman, *Prayer with Fire* (Brooklyn, NY, 2006), which offers a ‘5-minute lesson a day’.

²⁴⁹ See his commentary on Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, ch. 10.

there's no logic in the way *hakadosh barukh hu* [God] works, it's not logical at all, it's just something we don't understand.

As a result of this choice to privilege traditional Jewish thought over Western ideas, the most confident (though not necessarily the most sophisticated) articulation of belief and theological ideas came from *haredi* women, like Menucha Mizrahi:

It is very important to understand *that everything we do*, it's not coincidence. [...] There's a tsunami, there's a hurricane, Hurricane Katrina. [...] This is Hashem telling us that we're doing things, I'm telling you, I see things that happen, they want to make these gay marriages, in New York, and they made this, you know, 'Oh it's legal and it's now going to be this'. The next week came a thunderstorm and in New York, it was like the basements were flooded. I'm not saying that they deserve it, don't misunderstand me, non-Jewish people are just as good,²⁵⁰ we're all created equally in the eyes of God, but Hashem feels He wants to show, 'I've got the upper hand, I'm Hashem.' I see it all the time.

Both Menucha and Kate articulated the theology of 'accumulated merit' that can be won by means of pietistic practices and good deeds, and then 'redeemed' on behalf of those in need (or redirected by God to benefit someone), in combination with an innovative interpretation of the creation and role of angels:

If you do a *mitzvah* to some degree, it might not show itself for you here and now, but it's held in abeyance or something, or could benefit another person 50 million miles away, and in the other way, if somebody does something which is terrible or bad, it might not affect them particularly there, but it could affect another Jewish person. [...] It doesn't mean that the person doing the good gets necessarily the reward, it could be something good happens, and because of that, that's affecting something that we have no idea about, that's the whole idea of what *hakadosh barukh hu*'s got out there for us, we have *no* idea of what's going on. [...] Some people say you do a *mitzvah* and an angel appears, and if you do something bad, your accusing angel appears, and that's what we're told, we don't understand any of it, but it's much bigger than we know.²⁵¹

A *malakh* [angel] is created for every *amen* you answer. A *malakh* that protects you and protects the person who made the *berakhah*. Unbelievable!²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Though she also told me several stories designed to prove the innate moral and behavioural superiority of Jews.

²⁵¹ Kate Moskovitz, interview.

²⁵² Menucha Mizrahi, interview.

This ‘theology of angels and merit’ seems to be characteristic of *haredi* women; it is notable that rabbis rarely advance it, at least in public. In contrast, non-*haredi* women are reluctant to pronounce on such issues, preferring to focus on personal spirituality while often struggling to find some synthesis between the Western ideas they have imbibed from the wider society and their education, and the world of Jewish thought, in which they often have little education.

* * *

Orthodox polemic often claims that Jewish women who seek fulfilment outside the domestic arena are misguided and lost, influenced by feminist propaganda that encourages them to ‘ape men’ and lose sight of their God-given roles; at the other end of the polemical spectrum, some radical feminists assert that all marriage is inherently oppressive and that women who aspire to build and nurture a family are victims of false consciousness and self-deceit. Most Orthodox women see their domestic role in very different, more nuanced and complex terms, viewing it as central to their identity and to Jewish continuity, but not as the only sphere in which they should be active religiously. Many of them, particularly the Modern Orthodox, have indeed internalized feminist arguments and seek to extend their religious lives outside the home, and to take a more active religious role within it, but they all share the conviction that the creation of a Jewish home and the raising of children to be good human beings and faithful Jews is a task of vital importance.²⁵³ *Haredi* women, who rarely express opposition to *haredi* ideology, see their role in preparing the essential infrastructure for the observance of sabbath and festivals, running a kosher kitchen, maintaining social networks, and nurturing children, the elderly, and needy community members as the heart of Jewish practice and the basis of Jewish spirituality. Non-*haredi* women, while often frustrated and impatient with inequalities and lack of opportunities in both the public and domestic spheres, still see their domestic roles as central, and as providing opportunities for the service of God.

²⁵³ This attitude could be viewed as an expression of ‘maternalist feminism’, ‘a form of feminism that focuses on improving the condition of women as mothers’, as defined in Walby, *Future of Feminism*, 16.

As we have seen in this chapter, while there are perceptible differences between the practices, beliefs, and attitudes of traditionalist, Modern Orthodox, and *haredi* women in the domestic sphere, they are united in their understanding of the home as a sacred Jewish space. Whether preparing food for the sabbath, listening to their children recite the Shema at bedtime, or immersing in a *mikveh*, women show remarkable creativity in investing the most mundane activities with a spiritual dimension, often applying creative interpretations of their actions that owe little or nothing to male and rabbinic understandings.

Chapter 6: Women's life in the family: 'non-official' activities

'I don't do any things like this [...] But I've grown up with loads of them. A lot of them are *halakhah*, a lot of them are customs and they're all mixed together.' Sarah Segal, interview.

* * *

I now turn to the most invisible sector of all, namely, individual customs or practices performed by women in a domestic or everyday context, many learnt from female relatives, and the part they play in women's religious lives. This is a difficult set of phenomena to investigate: individual practices are often so automatic that women do not reflect on them, or in some cases they receive so little attention from rabbis or in popular Jewish literature that women themselves sometimes discount or denigrate them as 'superstitions', even as they practise them. However, these customs, beliefs, and practices form the close texture of women's religious lives, giving expression to their own conception of their role as Jewish women and colouring the everyday with Jewish consciousness. In addition they reflect changing trends of religiosity and concepts of women's religious role, and provide an opportunity for women to express and think about their relationships with their family, their community, and the divine.

Definitions and status of practices

Orthodox Jews observe many customs, both in communal and domestic life, that are not explicitly prescribed by *halakhah*, ranging from widely accepted and uncontroversial practices (for instance, the Ashkenazi custom of eating cheesecake and dairy foods on Shavuot) to the little-known and occasionally theologically problematic (such as licking a child's forehead to protect it from the evil eye¹). I was particularly interested in customs that are or have been important to women but do not usually appear in modern practical guides (whether written or orally taught) to Jewish observance, and my first challenge was to find a descriptive term to explain what I was looking for. In an attempt to keep such terms as neutral as possible, I

¹ In the survey described below, only 4% of the 100 respondents had heard of this custom; none practised it themselves, but they remembered mothers or grandmothers who did.

generally used ‘folk custom’ or ‘folk practice’, or gave a few examples of such customs. In spite of the difficulty of finding an appropriate term, all my interviewees immediately recognized what I was talking about, though several responded, ‘Oh, you mean *superstitions*’. The question of the halakhic status and correct nomenclature of these practices frequently arose with respondents from the *haredi* and Modern Orthodox sectors, or those with a higher level of Jewish education, who often objected to the inclusion of a practice they regarded as normative or obligatory (which they generally practised themselves) in a list that included other practices (which they generally did *not* practise) that they regarded as ‘superstitions’ or ‘just customs’. Even when I pointed out that the list was composed of customs that women had chosen to tell me about, without any formal parameters for inclusion, they would often protest ‘But there are *sources* for this one! It’s halakhic!’— frequently in connection with a practice that another respondent might dismiss as a ‘ridiculous superstition’.

As an illustration, we can consider the range of responses to the questionnaire entry for ‘Not counting children’, included in the category ‘Avoiding the evil eye’, which was practised by 9% of respondents, with another 58% having heard of it. One woman wrote that it applied ‘to grandchildren’, five other women noted that it applied ‘to all living people’, three wrote that it applied ‘to every Jew’; one woman described it as ‘an ultra-Orthodox custom’, and another two thought it was a Lubavitch custom. Only two women described it as a halakhic obligation, one a young Modern Orthodox woman and the other a *haredi*, non-hasidic woman in her 60s:

LTG: I know you’re not keen on counting children ...

Kate Moskovitz: Well, you can’t count people anyway, even if you count them for a *minyan* you don’t count them one two three, no, you don’t.

LTG: What’s the reason you do it, because people have different reasons.

KM: But look, that comes from the Torah, that’s a Torah-based thing, half a shekel, *hetsi shekel*, that’s what it comes from, everyone gives a *hetsi shekel* and then you count the *shekalim*. So that’s the basis of that, isn’t it?

LTG: So you’d feel you do it because it’s a Torah thing, not an evil eye thing.

KM: Yes, that one I think so.²

² Kate Moskovitz, interview.

Mrs Moskovitz (and one other survey respondent) linked the custom to the Torah commandment of a half-shekel tax associated with the divinely mandated census of adult Israelite males, in Exodus 30: 12: ‘When you take the count of the Israelites, their number, every man must give a ransom for himself to the Lord when you count them so that there will be no plague’. Expanding this warning to apply in all situations and times, and to all Israelites, some rabbinic interpreters derived a universal prohibition on counting Jews from this verse, recorded in the Talmud: ‘Rabbi Eleazar said: Whosoever counts Israel, transgresses a [biblical] prohibition.’³ King David’s attempted census of Israel,⁴ which was followed by a plague, was adduced as proof of the terrible consequences of such counting. The commentator Rashi (1040-1105) gave a rationale: ‘The evil eye controls something which is counted’, and the prohibition was codified by several mediaeval and early modern halakhic authorities.⁵ The issue still comes up in connection with censuses, in Israel and elsewhere. Similar fears about counting people (or animals) are known from many cultures, often associated with the belief that the evil eye or some other malign force will harm individuals who have been counted.⁶

However, if we examine how respondents to the questionnaire regard this custom, it is significant that in spite of the long halakhic tradition discussing this issue, only two of them classed this as a ‘halakhic’ practice, with several others explicitly stating that they thought it was an ‘ultra-Orthodox’ or ‘Lubavitch’ (i.e. hasidic) custom, while 33% percent had never heard of it. Some respondents described it as a ‘superstition’. Thus, in spite of its undoubted halakhic codification, 91% of the Orthodox women responding to the questionnaire, including over 30 observant Modern Orthodox and *haredi* women, do not regard this custom as mandatory or as important enough to be included in their own practice. In the light of this variation in understanding of the halakhic and rational status of this custom, how is it to be defined? Should we use the emic definition by (part of) the male rabbinic elite,⁷ and shared by two women respondents, of this practice as halakhically-based and

³ BT *Yoma* 22b.

⁴ 2 Samuel 24: 10-15.

⁵ Golinkin, ‘Does Jewish Law Permit Taking a Census?’.

⁶ e.g. Opie and Tatem, *Dictionary*, 101-2; Murgoci, ‘Evil Eye in Roumania’.

⁷ Rabbis who regard the custom as mandatory whenever Jews might be counted are mostly *haredi*, while many Modern Orthodox rabbis argue that it does not apply to most situations, including censuses.

mandatory? Should we use the equally emic understanding, held by other respondents, of the practice as a hasidic or *haredi* custom? Or another emic interpretation that views this as an optional or even superstitious custom? Or should we apply an etic, rationalist definition of the practice as a common apotropaic belief, paralleled in many non-Jewish cultures?

In the light of these multiple sets of worldviews and understandings of the phenomena under investigation, my omission of precise definitions from the questionnaire was deliberate; I did not want to impose any etic classification system, since this would tell me little about the importance of such customs in women's religious lives. Instead I attempted to identify what women themselves regarded as practices worthy of note, to see whether this would in turn reveal any emic systems or principles of classification.

The questionnaire data revealed the existence of several, sometimes contradictory, definitions and classifications of these practices that vary in accordance with the complex intertwining of personal and familial identities, religious outlooks (*hashkafot*), Jewish educational levels, and emotional factors. In addition, many of the customs, especially those associated with women (such as pregnancy- and birth-related practices), do not appear in halakhic literature or traditional compilations of customs (*sifrei minhagim*), and are thus easy to describe as 'superstitions' or as unimportant by those who do not practise them. One Modern Orthodox rabbi to whom I showed the questionnaire dismissed all the practices recorded there succinctly: 'My opinion would be, in one word, rubbish. Absolute rubbish.' Here we can observe the exercise of power in the definition of practices as inside or outside the halakhic framework, whether as biblical commandments (*mitsvot de'oraita*), rabbinic commandments (*mitsvot derabanan*), rabbinic decrees (*takanot*), customs (*minhagim*), erroneous customs (*minhagei ta'ut*), or even 'superstitions' or 'magic' (related terms in Hebrew would be *darkhei ha'emori*, literally 'ways of the Amorites', and *kishuf*, 'magic' or 'witchcraft').⁸ Interestingly, a word that has recently become very popular in the *haredi* sector in describing many of these

⁸ For definitions of these halakhic terms, see Elon, *Jewish Law*.

practices, particularly newly-coined ones,⁹ is *segulah* (pl. *segulot*), a non-halakhic term that carries positive overtones of ‘blessing’, ‘charm’, and ‘remedy’.

Only a couple of *haredi* respondents or interviewees used the word *segulah*, however. Very few women (and by no means all men) have the necessary textual and halakhic knowledge to apply the halakhic system and its definitions to the customs they learn from their families, but rather derive their knowledge and personal practice from their relatives, friends, and communities. In general, they do not perform certain customs because of their secure halakhic basis, but because they have grown up watching their mothers perform them, because they associate a particular practice with a beloved grandmother, or even because a friend or a teacher recommends a custom as being a powerful *segulah* that will help them achieve a goal, such as finding someone to marry or healing a sick friend.¹⁰ The distinction between this mimetic attitude and a predominantly text-based, halakhic one has been described by Haym Soloveitchik: ‘A mimetic tradition mirrors rather than discriminates. Without criteria by which to evaluate practice, it cannot generally distinguish between central and peripheral, or even between religious demands and folkways.’¹¹

This is precisely what the questionnaire responses reveal: an organic and non-hierarchical attitude to a wide variety of practices of different halakhic status and origin. The majority of respondents are uninterested in the origins and halakhic significance of what they do, but are passionately invested in the emotional and personal resonances of these practices—their associations with family, their familiarity, the sense of security they provide, and their efficacy in achieving goals of personal, familial, and community flourishing.

⁹ In some instances, non-halakhic ‘folk’ practices are being redefined as *segulot*: an example is the custom of asking an unmarried girl to hold the *havdalah* candle at the height she would like her husband to be (see below, n. 16). Although most respondents regarded this as a gentle tease, a couple of websites listing *segulot* for getting married have included it: see ‘Life in the Married Lane’ blog, 20 Mar. 2014, at <<http://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/2014/02/03/a-segulah-to-get-married/>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

¹⁰ This trend seems likely to become stronger, as new *segulot* are circulated on websites, community email lists, and social media sites.

¹¹ Soloveitchik, ‘Rupture and Reconstruction’.

Aims of questionnaire

I knew about many customs from friends and, to a much more limited extent, from my own practice, but decided that a questionnaire would be necessary in order to form some idea of how widespread they were,¹² and to what extent they were currently practised as opposed to being ‘family folklore’, invoked in memories of older relatives but not actually performed. In order to gauge this, the questionnaire had three options for answers: ‘I do/did this/have had this done to me’, ‘Somebody in my family does this’, and ‘I have heard of this’.¹³ To give some idea of whether (and if so, how) these practices are changing over time, respondents were classed in one of six age groups,¹⁴ and there was also a question on the birthplace of grandparents, so that the importance of origin or Ashkenazi/Sefardi identity on custom performance could be assessed. As discussed in Chapter 2, the small size of the sample (100 women) and other methodological considerations mean that the results are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, though broad trends are apparent.

Most earlier studies of such practices have been folkloristic in character,¹⁵ often recording the existence of particular customs in a particular community, but giving little idea of the period at which these customs were practised, little if any information about the number of individuals who actually observed a particular custom (as opposed to having heard of it), and few if any details about how customs were transmitted. Speculation on the origin of customs rather than investigation of their meaning for those who practise them has been the focus of these works. Variations in attitudes towards such customs have also been neglected in previous research; my conversations with questionnaire respondents often revealed major differences in reactions, such as that between the amusement occasioned by getting a little girl to hold the *havdalah* candle at the hoped-for height of her future husband,¹⁶ and the outrage of a grandmother at her granddaughter’s ‘stepping over’ her brother as he sits on the floor, a practice thought to discourage growth. Both of these customs

¹² See above, Ch. 2, for methodological issues.

¹³ See Appendix 2, showing the questionnaire’s first page.

¹⁴ These were: 18-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, and over 71.

¹⁵ See e.g. Brav, ‘Evil Eye’; Dundes, *Evil Eye*; Klein, *A Time to Be Born*; Moss and Cappanari, ‘*Mal’occhio*’; Patai, *On Jewish Folklore*; Sabar, ‘Childbirth and Magic’; Sperber, *Jewish Life Cycle*.

¹⁶ *Havdalah*, literally ‘separation’, is the ceremony that ends the sabbath and ushers in the working week; blessings are said over wine, fragrant spices, and a candle with two wicks, often held by the youngest girl present.

are very common (39% of respondents observed the *havdalah* candle custom, with another 36% aware of it; and 22% observed the ‘stepping’ custom, with another 29% aware of it), but one is regarded as an endearing but not very serious practice, omission of which carries no consequences,¹⁷ while transgressing the other is often understood as a very real threat to health.

Basic data on respondents

In general, the sample seems fairly representative of the London Jewish community in terms of Ashkenazi/Sefardi origin and age.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, most respondents (78%) were born in the United Kingdom (62% of respondents were born in London); another 5% were born in South Africa, 4% in Israel, 10% elsewhere,¹⁹ and three respondents did not record their birthplace. The most common birthplace of respondents’ grandparents is the United Kingdom, at 26.75%, though if the constituent countries of eastern Europe are combined,²⁰ this group easily takes precedence, totalling 44.5%. The next largest grouping is Germany and Austria, at 7.75%, with the rest scattered among nineteen countries,²¹ and 2.75% whose birthplace was either unknown or unrecorded. The general picture corresponds with what is generally known of the Anglo-Jewish community, most of whom have lived in Britain for at least two generations, and most of whose ancestors came from eastern Europe.

Testing stereotypes and assumptions

As I collected the questionnaires, I became aware of a stereotype held by many respondents, to the effect that Sefardim are generally more ‘superstitious’ and would be likely to observe more customs of this type than Ashkenazim. This does not seem to be borne out by the evidence: of the 30 ‘top performers’—women who practised 25 or more of the customs listed—the top seven were all Ashkenazi, and only one

¹⁷ See above, n. 9.

¹⁸ See Appendix 4, Tables 1 and 2; cf. Ch. 2 and data from the 2001 census presented in Abramson, Graham, and Boyd, *Key Trends*, 11

¹⁹ See Appendix 4, Table 3.

²⁰ Including Belarus, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, Russia, ‘Russia/Poland’, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

²¹ See Appendix 4, Table 4.

Sefardi appeared in the group. Conversely, the woman who ranked eighth lowest in performance count (2 customs) of the entire survey was born in Baghdad, of pure Iraqi origin. The presence in the ‘top performers’ group of all four women of mixed Sefardi-Ashkenazi ancestry and of three women married to Sefardim probably reflects their access to two traditions, and the higher total number of customs that would thus be available to them, rather than any Sefardi proclivity to practise folk customs.

Another assumption was supported by the results, however: that women learn most customs of this type from female relatives, particularly older ones. Although I encouraged respondents to note in the ‘Comments’ space on the questionnaire where they had learned particular customs, few actually did this,²² but of the 282 responses on this topic, the majority indicated that women had learnt from older women:

Table 6.1: Transmission of customs analysed by generation

<i>From the older generation</i>	
Mother, mother-in-law, grandmother	153
Father, father-in-law, grandfather	25
Aunt, great-aunt	17
Uncle	1
‘Mother’s family’, ‘parents’, ‘grandparents’	<u>15</u>
<i>Total:</i>	<i>211</i>
 <i>From the same generation</i>	
Sister, sister-in-law	7
Brother, ‘brother-in-law’s family’	3
Husband	21
Female in-laws	<u>6</u>
<i>Total:</i>	<i>37</i>
 <i>From the younger generation</i>	
Daughter, daughter-in-law	22
Son	10
Granddaughter	<u>2</u>
<i>Total:</i>	<i>34</i>

The fact that daughters, daughters-in-law, sons, and even granddaughters appear as the sources of customs is significant; I would suggest that this is the result both of

²² Aware that asking women to answer 209 questions, in addition to providing details about their background, was quite demanding, I decided to make the ‘Comments’ section optional rather than risk discouraging respondents from filling in the questionnaire.

increased levels of Jewish education in recent decades and of the *ba'al teshuvah* phenomenon, in which younger members of the community develop an intense commitment to religious observance, sometimes to their parents' dismay. This process has been a feature of Jewish communities worldwide since the 1970s, and has been documented elsewhere,²³ but its relevance here is in the higher levels of Jewish education and enthusiasm for Jewish practice of those who become observant, who sometimes suggest or even demand changes in practice by their parents. This often involves higher levels of *kashrut* and sabbath observance, but may also include the adoption of pietistic practices. Most of the responses indicating a daughter as the source of a custom came from one United Synagogue woman in her 60s whose daughter had indeed become a *ba'alat teshuvah*, strongly influencing her mother's knowledge and level of practice.

Who practises these customs?

Returning to the group of 30 women who practise more than 25 customs, it is immediately apparent that most (nine) of the *haredi* respondents are included, as well as all seven rabbis' wives who completed the questionnaire. Rather surprisingly, one *haredi* woman appears in the 'low performers' group of 39 women who practise fewer than ten of the listed customs, but this may be because she came from a non-observant, traditionalist background before joining the Lubavitch *hasidim* in her 20s. The non-*haredi* women in the 'top performers' group are from the more observant, consciously Modern Orthodox end of the spectrum, and their presence in the group along with *haredi* women indicates that rather than being marginal 'superstitions', many of these practices form an integral part of the most Jewishly-educated and religiously observant respondents; as noted above, several practices are discussed and approved in classic halakhic texts.

The highest number of customs practised by an individual is 83, but only eight women practise more than 50 customs. Given that there were over 200 customs on the questionnaire, this emphasizes the fact that these customs do not form any type of 'set', but rather depend on family tradition and education; even those women who

²³ See e.g. Beynor, *Becoming Frum*; Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*; Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*; Mock-Degen, *Dynamics of Becoming Orthodox*; Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World*.

have a high performance rate may not even have heard of other common customs. This is further confirmed by the fact that several of the 39 women in the ‘low performers’ group are religiously observant, so the practice of these customs is not necessarily linked to either the performance or the lack of performance of mainstream, obligatory religious practices such as observing dietary laws or the sabbath. Additional support for the importance of the family context in transmitting customs comes from the fact that the two converts among the respondents reported moderate and low levels of performance, at 16 and 5 customs respectively, and the fact that two sisters in their 20s, from an observant Modern Orthodox family, showed very similar patterns of performance and knowledge, perhaps slightly influenced by the fact that the first sister had spent several months at a seminary in Israel:

Table 6.2: Comparison of two sisters’ knowledge of customs

	<i>Number of customs performed</i>	<i>Number heard of but not performed</i>	<i>Number never heard of</i>
<i>Sister 1</i>	8	48	138
<i>Sister 2</i>	7	28	165

Another factor that shapes women’s performance of and knowledge about these customs is life experience: it seems self-explanatory that an unmarried, observant United Synagogue woman in her late 50s appears near the bottom of the ‘low performers’ group, since she would not have had the chance to perform any of the large number of customs associated with marriage, pregnancy, and birth.

What customs are practised?

The questionnaire is organized into categories based on the purpose or context of the customs:²⁴

Table 6.3: Categories of customs on questionnaire

To get married	20 practices
To get pregnant	16
During pregnancy	16

²⁴ For a list of the practices on the questionnaire, with bibliographical references where these exist, see Appendix 3.

Birth	9
Safeguarding babies and small children	16
First menstruation	3
Against the evil eye or for good luck	26
Medical and curative practices	15
Death and funerals	27
Miscellaneous	51
<i>Total:</i>	<i>199</i>

The first six categories are gender-linked, covering women's lifecycle events from first menstruation to marriage, pregnancy, birth, and (culturally assigned) childcare; the next three are not gendered categories, although some of the specific practices they include are gender-linked, such as women not attending funerals. A few 'miscellaneous' customs are similarly gendered, such as a husband preparing sabbath candles for his wife to light,²⁵ or a woman eating a sweet as she leaves the *mikveh*.²⁶ Several others are associated with the sabbath and festivals, such as having round loaves for the blessing over bread at sabbath and festival meals, rather than the usual plaited ones, between Rosh Hashanah and Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot); others are pietistic practices to ensure the efficacy of prayers, such as praying at the Western Wall for 40 days, or 'rules' associated with avoiding bad fortune, such as 'Return borrowed pins or you'll quarrel with the lender'.²⁷

Of the list of roughly 200 practices, 25 customs were not actually practised by any of the respondents; these included two specific to men,²⁸ as well as practices from earlier times that have died out.²⁹ Several would be viewed as 'irrational' in the wider, non-Jewish community, and were often described by respondents as 'superstitions', making it less likely anyone would admit to practising them.³⁰ The

²⁵ 22% of respondents observe this; the usual explanation is that it gives the husband a share in the commandment of lighting sabbath candles.

²⁶ 6% of respondents do this, though 90% had never heard of the practice. Respondents explained this 'ensures a sweet week'.

²⁷ Nobody actually did this, but 8% of respondents had heard of it. Thanks to the decline in home sewing, this seems to be a custom that is dying out, like others associated with domestic technologies.

²⁸ Immersing in the *mikveh* of the Ari (the kabbalist Isaac Luria, 1534-72), in order to ensure proper repentance before death, and being called up for the honour of dressing the Torah scroll after a public reading (*gelilah*), in order to get married.

²⁹ e.g. the *Hollekreisch*, a naming ritual for baby girls, common in German-speaking areas until the 20th century; see Hammer, 'Holle's Cry' and Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 93-9.

³⁰ e.g. the avoidance of pictures of birds (thought to bring death or bad luck) or tying a red string around the waist of a pregnant woman to protect her unborn child. Some of these are paralleled in non-Jewish cultures and may have been derived from them.

table below shows the 24 most common customs, practised by at least 25% of respondents.

Table 6.4: Most common customs and percentages of age categories of respondents who practise them (grey boxes indicate highest percentages)

Custom	All	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71+
Wash hands after going to a cemetery/funeral ³¹	82	60	100	93	85	79	50
Honey on <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	73	80	80	92	65	72	33
Leave <i>yizkor</i> if one's parents are alive ³²	57	90	60	58	40	65	17
Cover mirrors at a <i>shiva</i> house	51	18	38	42	61	88	44
Round <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	50	45	57	64	39	50	44
Eat chicken soup for any illness	49	36	62	64	39	44	44
Don't reveal a boy's name till circumcision	45	9	44	71	52	50	22
Don't place the foot of a bed facing a door ³³	41	20	71	54	32	44	20
Bride & groom don't see each other for a week (or some days) before the wedding	41	9	76	57	35	44	11
Don't walk on graves	39	27	47	47	32	56	20
Hold <i>havdalah</i> candle as high as one wants one's husband to be	39	47	71	40	32	28	10
Put money in a new purse when giving it ³⁴	34	8	18	40	52	53	11
Say psalms (<i>tehilim</i>) for the sick	33	40	55	27	32	23	0
Say <i>tfu tfu tfu</i> or <i>po po po</i> against evil eye	32	20	18	54	32	28	50
Check <i>mezuzot</i> if troubled by evil eye	32	22	27	36	31	35	60
Drink from <i>sheva berakhot</i> cup in order to get married ³⁵	32	33	71	40	16	28	0
Take a plate fragment from a <i>tena'im</i> ceremony in order to get married ³⁶	31	47	41	34	16	34	20

³¹ This (non-gendered) custom is prescribed in several halakhic works, starting with Joseph Karo, *Shulhan arukh*, 'Orah hayim' 4: 18. One probable reason for its high rate of performance is its public nature; people attending funerals copy others performing the ritual.

³² *Yizkor* is the memorial service for the dead held on major festivals. Though the (non-gendered) practice of leaving the synagogue during *yizkor* if both one's parents are alive is classed as *minhag* (custom) rather than a halakhic obligation, feelings run high on the matter; several Modern Orthodox rabbis have encouraged everyone to remain in place for the service (see below, n. 44), while many *haredi* rabbis insist that if someone already practises this custom they should not change it. See Jakobovits, *Dear Chief Rabbi*, 103. Several respondents felt they might unintentionally harm their parents if they remained in synagogue for this ritual.

³³ Since 'they carry out the dead feet first'. See Opie and Tatem, *Dictionary*, 15-16.

³⁴ A widespread non-Jewish custom; see Opie and Tatem, *Dictionary*, 188-9.

³⁵ *Sheva berakhot*, lit. 'seven blessings', the seven nights of festive gatherings after a wedding, at which a sequence of seven nuptial blessings are recited over wine.

Custom	All	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71+
Chew something if someone sews clothes while you're wearing them ³⁷	28	7	18	20	32	50	40
Be <i>kvater/in</i> at a circumcision in order to have a child ³⁸	27	23	71	36	10	18	0
Don't make preparations before a birth	27	13	35	33	24	34	20
Don't sew your own clothes while wearing them ³⁹	25	8	18	21	26	47	22
Pregnant women don't go to funerals	25	7	30	28	30	36	0
Bride under the wedding canopy prays for unmarried friends	25	27	65	33	8	17	0
Give charity before lighting sabbath candles	25	9	31	29	26	38	0

The most common category here (eight customs) is that of death-linked customs, most of which are designed to avoid contact with the dead or with practices associated with mourning and funerals. Another five practices are intended to ward off the evil eye or other malign forces, with another two designed to prevent illness. Four are *segulot* for marriage, with another *segulah* to promote conception. Though very few are intrinsically gendered, most of them reflect traditional women's concerns of marriage, childbearing and rearing, and the protection of the family from evil forces, illness, and death. Respondents recorded no *segulot* at all connected with Torah learning, though these exist among men,⁴⁰ and only about ten customs associated with good fortune appeared in the survey, most of which were general rather than specific.⁴¹ Three practices might be described as pietistic—performing a praiseworthy religious action in order to accrue merit, either for the performer or for

³⁶ *Tena'im*, literally 'conditions', refers to the (non-obligatory) ceremony in which two sets of parents agree to their children's marriage. The ceremony developed among Ashkenazim in the 11th-12th centuries, but had declined by the 20th century, being performed only in hasidic communities until a recent rise in its popularity, apparently as a Jewish version of a secular engagement party. After the *tena'im* document is signed, the two mothers break a plate, often giving the fragments to unmarried girls as a *segulah* for marriage. See Sperber, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 151-7, which mentions a custom of giving the fragments to unmarried men for this reason (p. 153).

³⁷ Since 'it resembles sewing shrouds on the dead'; chewing or holding something in the mouth demonstrates the person is not dead.

³⁸ See Ch. 4 n. 160, and Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 183.

³⁹ A variant of the custom of chewing something if someone is sewing clothes on another person; I listed it separately since it appeared independently of the other variant.

⁴⁰ See BT *Hor.* 13b for lists of practices that make one forget one's Torah learning and adversely affect study, and of practices that reverse forgetfulness. Current male practices of this type include not walking between two women, and not eating the end of the *halah*.

⁴¹ The principal exception was the custom of *shlisl-khale* (Yiddish: 'key *halah*'), baking a key into *halah* or baking *halah* in the shape of a key for the sabbath following Passover, which is a *segulah* for 'good *parnasah*' (livelihood). 10% of respondents practised this custom; another 21% had heard of it. It was first mentioned by R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Apter Rebbe (1748-1825), in *Ohev yisra'el*. Debate rages on internet forums about the authenticity and origins of the custom; see Alfassa, 'Origins', for a denunciation of it as a recent practice of Christian origin.

someone in need.⁴² One practice (putting money in a purse) is not of Jewish origin, a phenomenon that I will examine later.

Age as a factor in knowledge and performance of customs

Surprisingly, the oldest women know far fewer customs than younger women:

Table 6.5: Age distribution of knowledge of customs

<i>Age category</i>	<i>Number of customs in questionnaire never heard of</i>
18-30	40
31-40	14
41-50	22
51-60	14
61-70	21
71+	<u>85</u>
Total	196

The second highest number of unknown customs is associated with the 18-30 group; this pattern is also visible when age distribution is compared to the performance of customs. We can see that women aged 31-40 constitute almost a third of the ‘top performers’ group (those who practise more than 25 customs), in line with high performance rates for 30-50-year-olds revealed elsewhere in the analysis:

Table 6.6: Age distribution of ‘top performers’ of customs

<i>Age category</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Percentage of ‘top performers’ group</i>
18-30	1	3.3
31-40	9	30.0
41-50	7	23.3
51-60	5	16.6
61-70	6	20.0
71+	<u>2</u>	<u>6.6</u>
Totals	30	99.8

⁴² Saying psalms for the sick; a bride praying under the *hupah* for unmarried friends; and giving charity before lighting sabbath candles.

Paralleling this pattern, it is also notable that only one woman in the 18-30 age category and two among the over-70s belong to the ‘top performers’ group. The age distribution for the ‘low performers’ group (who practise fewer than ten customs) reverses this pattern:

Table 6.7: Age distribution of ‘low performers’ of customs

<i>Age category group</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Percentage of ‘low performers’</i>
18-30	9	23.3
31-40	2	5.1
41-50	5	12.8
51-60	10	25.6
61-70	7	17.9
71+	<u>6</u>	<u>15.3</u>
Totals	39	100

The same pattern emerges if we compare percentages of ‘top’ and ‘low’ performers *within* the age categories:

Table 6.8: Age distribution of ‘top’ and ‘low’ performers within age categories

Age group	Total number of respondents (= percentage)	Number of ‘top’ performers	‘Top’ percentages (rounded)	Number of ‘low’ performers	‘Low’ percentages (rounded)
18-30	14	1	7%	9	64%
31-40	17	9	52%	2	12%
41-50	15	7	47%	5	33%
51-60	25	5	20%	10	40%
61-70	18	6	33%	7	39%
71+	10	2	20%	6	60%
Totals	100	30	30%	39	39%

The youngest and oldest are the least likely to practise these customs. In the case of the youngest, this might be partly due to the fact that some of them have not yet married or had children, and are therefore underrepresented in the categories associated with pregnancy, birth, and small children. Another factor might be the greater likelihood that their parents and siblings are still alive, giving them less exposure to customs associated with death and funerals. This hypothesis would not account for the low rate of performance of the oldest women, however. When we look at the type of customs practised by these two age groups, the similarity between them recedes:

Table 6.9: Most popular customs among 18-30s (30% and over performance rate)

Custom	Percentage
Leave <i>yizkor</i> if one's parents are alive	90
Honey on <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	80
Wash hands after visiting the cemetery or attending a funeral	60
Hold <i>havdalah</i> candle as high as one wants one's husband to be	47
Take a plate fragment from a <i>tena'im</i> ceremony in order to get married	47
Round <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	45
Say psalms (<i>tehilim</i>) for the sick	40
Say <i>amen</i> & <i>yeheh shemeh raba</i> with devotion (<i>kavanah</i>) ⁴³	38
Eat chicken soup to cure illness	36
Drink from <i>sheva berakhot</i> cup to get married	33

Here, the most common custom is leaving the *yizkor* memorial service if one's parents are alive; in comparison, only 17% of women over 71 practised this custom. This may be due to older women interpreting the survey question as relating to their current practice rather than including what they used to do when their own parents were alive.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, three of the customs most popular among 18-30-year-olds are *segulot* for finding a husband (or ensuring one of the right height), a major concern for younger Jewish women given the strong social expectations of universal marriage throughout the Jewish community. If this table is compared with one documenting the most popular customs among women over 71, some sharp contrasts can be seen:

Table 6.10: Most popular customs among women aged 71 and over (30% and over performance rate)

Custom	Percentage
Check <i>mezuzot</i> if troubled by evil eye ⁴⁵	60
Wash hands after visiting the cemetery or attending a funeral	50
Say <i>tfu tfu tfu</i> or <i>po po po</i> against the evil eye	50
Cover mirrors at a <i>shiva</i> house	44
Round <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	44

⁴³ This pietistic practice enjoins particular devotion (*kavanah*) when saying *amen*, or *yeheh shemeh raba mevorakh le'olam va'ed* ('May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever'), the response recited during the *kadish* prayer. Some respondents claimed this aids the success of private petitionary prayers.

⁴⁴ Alternatively, it might reflect the influence of the strenuous (and controversial) efforts of some United Synagogue rabbis in the 1980s to discourage the practice, which they regarded as superstitious.

⁴⁵ Checking *mezuzot*, the parchments bearing three biblical texts that are affixed in protective cases to the right doorposts of all rooms (except bathrooms and lavatories) in fulfilment of a biblical commandment (Deut. 6: 8), occurred in several contexts among the respondents: to ward off the evil eye, to get pregnant, in cases of illness, to get married, and 'for any problem'. In spite of intense opposition by many rabbis to the use of *mezuzot* as amulets or for apotropaic purposes (see e.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh torah*, 'Hilkhot tefilin umezuzah vesefer torah' 5: 4), popular understandings continue to see them as protective.

Eat chicken soup as a remedy for illness	44
Chew something if someone sews your clothes while you are wearing them	40
Don't give knives as a gift (unless recipient makes a token payment) ⁴⁶	40
Bride throws her bouquet to unmarried friends after wedding	34
Honey on <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret (or Sukkot)	33
Bring candles/flour/sugar to a new house ⁴⁷	33
Don't step over someone sitting on the floor	30
Tie red thread/string on things against the evil eye	30
Use salt against the evil eye ⁴⁸	30

Only four of these customs appear in the 18-30s table above.⁴⁹ Protection against the evil eye emerges as a major concern for older women, in contrast to the 18-30-year-olds, who seem less concerned about this (except in their very high performance rate for leaving *yizkor* if their parents are living, though this may be understood by them as demonstrating respect for parents rather avoiding the evil eye). Corresponding performance rates of evil eye customs for the youngest group are much lower:

Table 6.11: Performance rate of evil eye customs for 18-30-year-olds

Checking <i>mezuzot</i>	20%
Saying <i>tfu tfu tfu</i>	20%
Tying red thread	20%
Using salt	7%

The importance of concerns about the evil eye for the oldest women in contrast to their lesser importance for the youngest women is highlighted when we compare the rate of *performance* of customs designed to repel the evil eye to *knowledge about* but not performance of such customs:

⁴⁶ Of non-Jewish origin; see Opie, *Dictionary*, 217-8. Such a gift would 'cut the friendship'.

⁴⁷ A rarer variant was hiding these materials in a new house before the owners moved in, so that the house and its inhabitants will never lack food, light, etc.; also known outside the Jewish world, see Opie, *Dictionary*, 204-5.

⁴⁸ One woman in her 50s reported that her mother used to pin a small bag of salt tied with a blue ribbon to her knickers! Other informants reported that parents or grandparents threw salt 'over their shoulders', a common non-Jewish custom, so several traditions, not all Jewish, seem to be represented here. See Opie, *Dictionary*, 339 and Sperber, *Minhagim*, vol. 8, ch. 9 for use of salt against demons.

⁴⁹ Two customs associated with *halah* between Rosh Hashanah and Shemini Atseret, washing hands after a cemetery visit, and the 'medicinal' use of chicken soup, all of which are very common.

Table 6.12: Comparison of rates of performance and rates of knowledge of evil eye customs among women aged 18-30 and women aged 71 and over

Custom	% of 18-30s who are performers	% of 18-30s who 'have heard of'*	% of 71+ who are performers	% of 71+ who 'have heard of'*
Check <i>mezuzot</i>	20	60	50	0
Say <i>tfu tfu tfu</i>	20	67	50	40
Tie red thread	20	80	30	20
Use salt	7	40	30	10

*This percentage does *not* include those who perform the custom

A far higher rate of older women who know about these customs actually perform them (from over half to all of them), in contrast to the youngest women, of whom only a seventh to a quarter of those who know about these customs actually practise them. This difference between the oldest and the youngest women holds true across the entire range of customs, with the youngest women consistently knowing more customs but performing fewer of them, in contrast to the oldest women, who know far fewer customs but perform more of them. At first sight this seems counter-intuitive: surely older women would be more familiar with traditional practices and know more of them than much younger women? However, this evidence reinforces other data from my research, which point to a profound change in the nature of women's religious lives and support Soloveitchik's hypothesis of the replacement of a mimetic system of education and socialization by a text- and institution-based one. To throw more light on this, let us return to the comparison of the most popular customs (in terms of performance) among the 18-30 and over-71 groups.⁵⁰

Two of the most popular customs among women aged 71 and over are of non-Jewish origin (not giving knives as a gift, and the bride throwing her bouquet),⁵¹ in contrast to an absence of customs of non-Jewish origin among the 18-30 group's top ten customs. If we examine the eight customs on the questionnaire that definitely seem to be of non-Jewish origin,⁵² and compare the performance rates in the different age

⁵⁰ See Tables 6.9 and 6.10 above.

⁵¹ As opposed to customs *paralleled* in non-Jewish societies, such as using salt to ward off evil, the use of red in apotropaic rituals, and many others.

⁵² There may be more, that I have not securely identified as being non-Jewish in origin. In addition, it is difficult to know how to categorize an old custom that was probably originally not Jewish but is

groups, it is clear that they are more often practised by older than by younger women:

Table 6.13: Performance rates (percentages) of non-Jewish customs by age group, with highest rates per custom highlighted

Custom	All ages combined	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71+
Money in new purse	34	8	18	40	52	53	11
Don't give knives	23	11	13	21	32	28	40
Touching wood	20	20	7	29	32	7	17
Bride throws bouquet	12	0	0	8	11	29	33
Eye styes - cure with wine/tea	5	0	12	14	4	0	34
Eye styes - cure with gold ring	4	0	6	7	4	6	0
Warts - cure with meat/ tied string	4	0	0	7	9	6	0
Avoiding green	3	0	0	0	8	0	10

Although several respondents described touching wood and the bride's throwing of the bouquet as 'non-Jewish' or 'Christian' customs, a fifth of all the women surveyed actually did touch wood, with a third of women aged 41-60 and 17% of the oldest group practising this custom. Again, this might seem counter-intuitive, but again it points to a difference in the nature of older and younger women's religious lives. Very few women aged 71 and over went to Jewish schools, and in many cases their Jewish education was disrupted by evacuation during World War II. In contrast, by 2011 about half of all Jewish children aged 4-18 attended Jewish schools.⁵³

Increasing numbers of Orthodox girls now spend a 'gap year' before university (or marriage in *haredi* circles) studying at seminaries in Israel or Gateshead, in parallel with the more established practice of sending boys to *yeshivah* to study.⁵⁴ As a result younger Orthodox women have a far higher level of formal Jewish education than their grandmothers and mothers, which often trumps mimetically-learned and family-based customs that may seem incorrect, suspect, or simply worthless in the light of greater text-based knowledge. Stories abound of girls 'coming back from sem' and criticizing Jewish practice at home, or persuading their parents to adopt more stringent forms of *kashrut* and sabbath observance. Traditional practices associated

now widely accepted as Jewish, e.g. not placing a bed with its foot facing a door. The customs described here as non-Jewish are those of which I can find no mention in any Jewish context, which respondents often categorize as non-Jewish, and which are amply documented in non-Jewish contexts.

⁵³ The proportion of Orthodox children attending Jewish schools is considerably higher.

⁵⁴ This began to be popular in the 1970s, and is now *de rigueur* in observant circles, both *haredi* and non-*haredi*.

with warding off the evil eye, though several are recorded in the Talmud and mediaeval sources, can seem superstitious and embarrassing in the light of modernity, while newly-minted pietistic practices are often learnt at ‘sem’, either from teachers or from peers, or from the internet. This is borne out by analysis of the pietistic customs recorded, several of which are of recent origin,⁵⁵ by age group:

Table 6.14: Performance rates (percentages) of pietistic customs by age group, with highest rates per custom highlighted

Custom	All ages	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71+
Say psalms for the sick	33	40	55	27	32	23	0
Bride prays under <i>hupah</i> for unmarried friends	25	27	65	33	8	17	0
Give charity before lighting sabbath candles	25	9	31	29	26	38	0
Say <i>amen</i> and <i>yeheh shemeh</i> with <i>kavanah</i> to obtain something ⁵⁶	24	38	35	36	8	18	22
Give charity to protect someone	22	0	33	35	11	39	0
Say ‘your verse’ in <i>Elokai netsor</i> ⁵⁷	20	23	41	36	8	12	0
Take <i>halah</i> in the merit of the sick	17	10	33	43	5	0	0
Say the prayer of the Shelah ⁵⁸	17	0	13	38	12	23	0
Take on an extra <i>mitsvah</i> in merit of the sick	16	9	26	29	13	12	0
Say psalms to get married	15	13	24	20	16	6	10
Say psalms/prayers to get pregnant	13	0	14	40	0	0	0
Say special prayers during pregnancy	5	0	0	13	4	12	0
Bake <i>halah</i> & giving it away to get pregnant	4	7	0	7	8	0	0
Say <i>Shir hama’alot</i> during labour ⁵⁹	3	0	7	7	0	0	0
Say <i>Perek shirah</i> for 40 days to get married ⁶⁰	3	8	0	7	4	0	0
Pray for childless friends during labour	2	0	6	0	4	0	0
Recite Song of Songs each Friday to get married ⁶¹	2	8	0	0	0	6	0
Give double tithes to increase one’s wealth	1	0	0	0	5	0	0
Pray for 40 days at the Western Wall to obtain one’s desire ⁶²	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

⁵⁵ Sometimes the practice itself is mainstream or ancient, but has recently been ‘rejigged’ as a pietistic practice: thus taking *halah* in the merit of a sick person, in order to aid their recovery, is a new twist on the biblical commandment to take *halah* when baking bread, regarded as a major ‘women’s *mitsvah*’ since rabbinic times, but not performed to benefit others.

⁵⁶ While the idea that one should recite prayers with devotion appears in the Mishnah, saying certain phrases with ‘extra’ *kavanah* in order to obtain one’s desires seems to be a recent practice.

⁵⁷ After reciting the last paragraph (*elokai netsor*) of the *amidah* prayer, one adds a biblical verse that begins and ends with the letters that begin and end one’s Hebrew name. For the 17th-century origin of this custom, intended to preclude forgetting one’s name when facing divine judgement after death, see Golinkin, ‘Why Do Some Jews’.

⁵⁸ A prayer by the kabbalist R. Isaiah Horowitz (the Shelah, c. 1565-1630) for the welfare of one’s children, recited on the eve of Rosh Hodesh Sivan. It is currently being popularized on Orthodox blogs, websites, and email lists.

⁵⁹ There are 15 psalms (120-134) that begin with the words *shir hama’alot*; the respondents did not specify which one should be recited, but may have meant Psalm 126, the best-known.

⁶⁰ *Perek shirah* is an ancient text listing the praises of God (in the form of biblical quotations) recited by all elements of creation. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1906 notes that it is rarely recited, ‘except by very pious Israelites’, but it has become a popular *segulah* associated with women in recent years.

⁶¹ Song of Songs is recited every Friday afternoon at synagogue by Sefardi men. Its recitation by women as a *segulah* for getting married seems to be recent.

Very few of these customs are performed by the oldest women; the highest rates of performance are among women aged 31-50, followed by the 18-30 group. Older women's ignorance of these customs is very clearly demonstrated by a comparison of their rates of performance and their knowledge of such customs with that demonstrated by the 18-30-year-olds, in relation to the top ten pietistic customs:

Table 6.15: Comparison of rates of performance and rates of knowledge of pietistic customs among women aged 18-30 and women aged 71 and over

Custom	% of 18-30s who are performers	% of 18-30s who 'have heard of it'*	% of 71+ who are performers	% of 71+ who 'have heard of it'*
Say psalms for the sick	40	47	0	10
Bride prays under <i>hupah</i> for unmarried friends	27	47	0	0
Give charity before lighting sabbath candles	9	36	0	33
Say <i>amen</i> and <i>yeheh shemeh</i> with <i>kavanah</i>	38	31	22	11
Give charity to protect someone	0	45	0	0
Say 'your verse' in <i>Elokai netsor</i>	23	15	0	0
Take <i>halah</i> in the merit of the sick	10	20	0	17
Say the prayer of the Shelah	0	0	0	0
Take on an extra <i>mitsvah</i> in merit of the sick	9	64	0	0
Say psalms to get married	13	60	10	0

*This percentage does *not* include those who perform the custom

The older women have simply never heard of many of these customs, in contrast to both the youngest women and those aged 31-50, more of whom have attended a Jewish school, been to a seminary, or use the internet, which is now a major source of *segulot* both old and newly-minted.

⁶² This is also of recent origin, and was described as having no halakhic basis by R. Yosef Shelomoh Elyashiv (1910-2012), a leading *haredi* rabbi. See <<http://lifeinIsrael.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/interesting-psak-form-rav-elyashiv-40.html>> (accessed 24 June 2014).

Origins and development

To what extent do the customs collected in the questionnaire reflect what is known of women's practices in earlier periods? This is very difficult to assess, since so little was written about what women did, and what was recorded was documented by men. In addition, the definition of *halakhah* and *minhag* and their interrelationship in the mediaeval period constitutes a major area of academic debate, which cannot be summarized here, though for convenience we may cite Israel Ta-Shma's definition of *minhag* as 'any religious action that has halakhic or quasi-halakhic status in the rabbinic sources but no talmudic source',⁶³ though this would apply only to some of the customs revealed by the survey and is not a very useful concept in the context of the present analysis. The mediaeval and early modern *sifrei minhagim* (manuals of customs) or *sifrei hanhagut* (books of recommended practices) rarely mention women, and when they do, record practices that the male elite thought women should be observing rather than documenting what women were actually doing.⁶⁴ As noted by Ta-Shma,⁶⁵ many *sifrei minhagim*, which became popular in the thirteenth century, were written by individuals who had served great religious leaders and wished to record their practices, especially in the synagogue; it is not surprising that women are rarely mentioned. The pietistic practices other sources recommend to their (male) readers include frequent fasting, extreme humility, confession of sins, care to pronounce every word of the obligatory prayers with *kavanah* (devotion), not looking at women, wearing two sets of *tefilin*, and an intensification of avoidance of menstruating women⁶⁶—few of which would apply to women, and none of which (with the exception of reciting liturgical responses with extra devotion in order to obtain one's desire) can be paralleled in the material gathered in the questionnaires.

Other pre-modern sources include halakhic codes and responsa, and books dealing with *ta'amei minhagim* (explanations of customs), which also generally present

⁶³ Ta-Shma, *Minhag ashkenaz hakadmon*, 21 (my translation). For further discussion of the relationship between *minhag* and *halakhah*, see Ta-Shma, *Halakhah, minhag umetsiyut*, esp. chs. 1 and 5; id., *Minhag ashkenaz hakadmon*, introduction, esp. pp. 16-41, 49-73. See also Zimmer, *Olam keminhago noheg*, 10.

⁶⁴ e.g. Isaac of Tyrnau's *Sefer minhagim*, written in the late 14th century and first printed in 1566. It has chapters on the three daily prayer services, festivals and fasts of the Jewish liturgical year, and lifecycle rituals; apart from weddings, women have little role in most of the practices described, which focus on synagogue rituals and formal prayer.

⁶⁵ Ta-Shma, *Halakhah, minhag umetsiyut*, 110-11.

⁶⁶ This list is derived from Kanarfogel, 'Peering Through the Lattices', ch. 1.

men's religious lives as the norm, with only occasional mentions of women's practices.⁶⁷ In her analysis of the representation of women in *Sefer hasidim*, a pietistic work of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, Judith Baskin observes: 'We cannot find women's voices in *Sefer Hasidim* [...]; we cannot know what any individual woman thought or felt, though occasionally we may know how they acted. Rather, we are left with one male elite's perceptions of a wide range of females and female behaviours, both approved and disapproved.'⁶⁸ Exceptions to the male-authored and male-dominated sources are provided by the books of *tkhines*, which uniquely preserve information about women's understanding of such practices and their spiritual lives; however, they only mention women's practices indirectly unless there is a *tkhine* associated with them.⁶⁹ As a result of the near-invisibility of women in most of these sources, our knowledge of women's practices and religious lives in the past is patchy at best (as indeed is our knowledge of current women's practice).⁷⁰ Information about regional variation is almost non-existent, and the lives of pre-modern Sefardi women, in particular, are particularly poorly documented, except in folkloristic studies.⁷¹

However, some practices recorded by the survey, including some non-gendered examples, can be traced back to the Talmud, or even the Bible. These include not counting Jews (discussed above), the use of red string for protection,⁷² wearing amulets,⁷³ eating mandrake root to aid conception,⁷⁴ wearing an *even tekumah*

⁶⁷ For instance, an examination of the 54 customs in the section on funerals and mourning in Sperling, *Ta'amei haminhagim*, published in 1890, revealed only two paralleled in my survey, plus another 24 (non-gendered) customs that are widely practised (e.g. mourners not wearing leather shoes, or placing a stone on a grave when visiting it) but were not mentioned by the respondents, either because they thought they were obvious or because they were unaware of them. Only one custom from Sperling's work is specifically associated with women (a special *kinah* [elegy] recited by women), but this no longer seems to be practised.

⁶⁸ Baskin, 'From Separation to Displacement', 2.

⁶⁹ Some later *tkhines* were written by men. For a superb analysis of pre-modern Jewish women's spirituality as revealed by analysis of *tkhines*, see Weissler, *Voices*. Since they are principally prayers, however, they do not often refer to non-verbal customs of the type discussed here.

⁷⁰ For recent works on mediaeval Jewish women, see Ch. 1 n. 27; for the history of women's Torah education, see Zolty, 'And All your Children'; for an edition, translation, and introduction to a popular Yiddish guide to the 'women's *mitsvot*', R. Benjamin Slonik's *Seyder mitsvos noshim* (Krakow, 1577), together with discussion of its social context, see Fram, *My Dear Daughter*.

⁷¹ e.g. Sabar, 'Childbirth and Magic'. See Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 127-31 for Kurdish Jewish women, and a bibliography of studies of oriental Jewish women's religious lives (pp. 166-9).

⁷² See Teman, 'Red String', for biblical and postbiblical sources.

⁷³ Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, ch. 10. See also Schrire, *Hebrew Magic Amulets*. 17% of questionnaire respondents wear amulets, with another 41% aware of the custom.

against miscarriage,⁷⁵ and the belief that treading on toenail cuttings causes miscarriage.⁷⁶ Others can be documented from mediaeval and nineteenth-century sources, such as checking *mezuzot* in cases of illness or misfortune,⁷⁷ spitting to ward off demons or the evil eye,⁷⁸ or changing the name of a sick person.⁷⁹ The sources cited above also preserve information about customs that are no longer practised, such as the early modern Ashkenazi women's practice of measuring graves with wicks that they then used to make candles for use in synagogue on Yom Kippur,⁸⁰ or a nineteenth-century practice of aiding a difficult delivery by giving the mother water drawn from seven wells.⁸¹ Present practice is often quite different from that of the past; some changes are linked to technological and material change (since candles are no longer made at home, it is not surprising that candle-making rituals have disappeared), but other disappearances and innovations are more difficult to explain. The questionnaire data reveal that practice is still changing, as noted above, with the assimilation of non-Jewish customs (a process operative in the past as well), the gradual abandonment of practices that seem 'superstitious' to women with good secular educations, and the introduction of new, often pietistic customs, especially among the young. Unlike most of the other customs recorded, the latter introduce a new element of prayer- or text-linked, verbal techniques, as opposed to the action- and object-centred nature of many earlier customs;⁸² as well as reflecting the higher level of text-based education among younger women, this may also reflect a desire to perform practices formerly associated with male forms of piety.

⁷⁴ See Gen. 30: 14-17. No respondent actually practised this, though 11% had heard of it. Only two women described it as a modern custom; three identified it as a biblical practice.

⁷⁵ A special stone; see BT *Shabat* 66b and Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 92. Only 2% of respondents had done this; another 3% had heard of the practice or had a family member who had done it.

⁷⁶ BT *Nidah* 17b, *Mo'ed katan* 18a. This was not included in the questionnaire, but several women mentioned it after the survey was finished.

⁷⁷ Sperber, *Minhagei yisra'el*, vol. viii, ch. 8. Checking *mezuzot* is very common, and appeared five times on the questionnaire, in contexts of the evil eye (31% had done this); infertility (9%); ill health (17%); finding a marriage partner (2%); and 'for any problem' (21%).

⁷⁸ Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 159. 7% of respondents did this, 61% knew of it.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 204-5. 8% of respondents had done this, 16% had a family member who had done it, and 52% had heard of it.

⁸⁰ Weissler, *Voices*, 133-46.

⁸¹ Sperling, *Sefer ta'amei haminhagim*.

⁸² Apart from the *tkhines* of the early modern period, some of which are still used in hasidic circles, though none of my informants mentioned them.

One interesting feature characteristic of women's practice is that the purpose of a custom is sometimes realigned or extended to fit contemporary or personal needs.⁸³ Elly Teman has documented the birth of a new Israeli application of the ancient custom of tying red thread or string on people and objects,⁸⁴ which seems to have originated as a protective device and symbolic maintainer of boundaries.⁸⁵ In the 1930s, the practice acquired connotations of promoting fertility, with women visiting Rachel's tomb near Bethlehem and purchasing red thread that had been wrapped around the tomb to help them conceive. Teman found that from the 1980s onwards, Israeli women had transformed the practice into a new protective ritual, tying red thread around their soldier sons' hands at their passing-out parades, thus adapting an ancient practice in response to the stress experienced in a period of repeated conflict and terrorist attacks.

In one unusual case among my interviewees, a fertility custom seems to have been repurposed as a charm for promoting marriage: Sheyna Marcus, a single woman in her 20s under considerable pressure to get married, reported that her father had given her the amputated foreskin from her nephew's circumcision, explaining that her sister-in-law had said that burying it was a *segulah* for getting married!⁸⁶ The original custom, common among Jews from North Africa and Turkey, was to *swallow* the foreskin to promote conception, especially of a son, but presumably this was toned down to suit modern sensibilities.⁸⁷ Another instance, typifying the current enthusiasm for new *segulot* and pietistic practices, is the commandment of separating *halah*, described in Chapter 4, which in recent years has taken on a new significance as a source of merit (*zekhut*) that can be 'stored' and used for others' benefit—in itself an idea that seems to be relatively recent. Classical Jewish thought includes the

⁸³ See also the new interpretation of holding a *havdalah* candle, discussed above, n. 9.

⁸⁴ This practice appeared in four contexts in my survey: worn against the evil eye (19% performed this, with another 60% aware of the custom), sewn into a wedding dress (8% performed, 18% aware), worn around the waist when pregnant (no performers, 9% aware), and attached to children's clothes or beds (8% performed, 28% aware). All seem to be protective in nature; no respondents mentioned this practice in the context of fertility.

⁸⁵ Teman, 'Red String'.

⁸⁶ She decided she would comply, 'to keep her [sister-in-law] happy, and I appreciate the thought, even if it is a bit gross. It can't hurt to be involved in a *mitzvah*, *segulah* or not.' For the 'it can't hurt' response, see below.

⁸⁷ Raphael Patai, 'Folk Customs and Charms Relating to Birth' (Heb.), *Talpiyot*, 6 (1953), 1-2, cited in Sperber, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 15-16.

idea of *zekhut avot*, the protective merit of the patriarchs,⁸⁸ but the concept of earning merit by performing meritorious deeds and *segulot*, which can then be used like a spiritual equivalent of financial capital and ‘donated’ to other people, seems to be strongly associated with the recent proliferation of pietistic practices.

The question of ‘magic’

Many customs recorded in the questionnaire raise the question of whether some, at least, of these practices should be categorized as ‘magical’. Some are definitely not ‘mainstream’ and could perhaps be described as magical: examples include *blay gisn*, the practice of detecting and removing the influence of the evil eye by pouring molten lead into a glass of water,⁸⁹ and biting off the end of an *etrog* in order to conceive a male child.⁹⁰ Here we come up against the long-running anthropological debate about the definition of, boundary between, and interrelationships of the terms ‘magic’ and ‘religion’, and the role of rationality in both categories, as well as the relationship between these concepts and that of science.⁹¹

Starting with E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-73), the ideal of an emic definition of magic has often been urged, with practices being understood in terms of the categories and values of the culture under consideration. Though it is somewhat doubtful that a completely emic definition and interpretation of such practices could actually be achieved by anthropologists (whose field of study is itself an irredeemably etic project), it is undeniable that elucidating the internal understandings of cultural phenomena is essential.⁹² This is complicated when considering Jewish practices by the fact that there is no single Jewish definition of magic, or even any agreement as to where the boundary between permitted and forbidden practices lies—a phenomenon equally familiar in modern Western culture, as Gideon Bohak observes: ‘a quick glance at the relevant literature will reveal that

⁸⁸ See Ch. 4 n. 142.

⁸⁹ 4% of respondents had done this; another 11% knew of it.

⁹⁰ 1% had done this, another 14% knew of it. An *etrog* is a citrus fruit, used as part of the *lulav* waving ritual of Sukkot.

⁹¹ See Tambiah, *Magic, Science, and Religion*, ch. 1 for the history of the debate.

⁹² Scholars of ancient magic and religion seem to be more realistic about this ideal, partly because of the difficulty of reconstructing an emic view for ancient societies, given the fragmentary evidence. Both Bohak (*Ancient Jewish Magic*, 4) and Hoffman (‘Fiat magia’, 190) argue that etic and emic approaches should be used simultaneously.

scholars and lay-persons alike can hardly agree on what *we* mean by “magic”, that is, on the emic definition of this term within our own [modern Western] culture.’⁹³ Since my interest lies in women’s understandings and practice of these customs, which often reveal tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish definitions of magic,⁹⁴ as well as between different Jewish definitions, I propose to use a fairly generalized etic definition alongside a range of emic definitions, and to examine the relationship between them revealed by women’s discussions of these practices.

For the purpose of this analysis I will use a ‘commonsense’ definition of magic as widely understood in the non-academic, Western world, as an etic heuristic device: magic consists of practices and beliefs that imply ‘a more active control of the environment than simply requesting the deity to intercede’,⁹⁵ and are often of an ‘irrational’ nature that ignores scientific concepts of causality; it often involves rituals, verbal formulae, and the manipulation of objects. In contrast to this definition lies the shifting and negotiable field of Jewish attitudes to and definitions of magic, the origins of which are masterfully portrayed by Bohak in his *Ancient Jewish Magic*. He notes that ‘not only is the Hebrew Bible far from systematically outlawing all forms of magic, it even lays the foundations for the development of some specifically Jewish magical technology’,⁹⁶ opening the way for the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud to find plenty of exceptions to their blanket ban on *keshafim* (magical practices): magic could be used in healing, to counter magic, and for social control, and they had no qualms about the use of amulets or the study of magic.⁹⁷ Rabbinic literature contains many examples of rabbis using magic themselves, sometimes to counter magicians but occasionally to destroy or control their enemies. Bohak emphasizes that magic

was not some socially deviant set of practices and beliefs condemned by heresiologists and punished by the authorities, nor was it a set of silly superstitions practiced solely by the ignorant masses. Rather, it was a

⁹³ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 4.

⁹⁴ For instance in the interpretation of affixing a *mezuzah*: what might seem to be a divinely ordained commandment to an observant Orthodox woman might be classed as a classic apotropaic magical practice by an academic rationalist.

⁹⁵ Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 170.

⁹⁶ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 67.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

technology mastered by many specialists and lay persons and accepted, and even utilized, by the religious establishment itself.⁹⁸

Later attempts, such as that made by Maimonides (1138-1204), to delegitimize magical practices and brand them as idolatrous or as *darkhei ha'emori*, 'ways of the Amorites'—a loose category applied by the talmudic rabbis to practices of which they did not approve⁹⁹—did not meet with unqualified success. Maimonides' strictures against magic *sensu stricto* and the magical performance and interpretation of the commandments form part of his wider battle against mystical, proto-kabbalistic trends in the Judaism of his time, which provided the necessary conceptual basis for the acceptance of magic. Ultimately his reform campaign did not succeed, and the essentialist, kabbalistic worldview largely prevailed, and has been normalized in the *haredi* world.¹⁰⁰ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries anti-magic attitudes made considerable headway in Jewish communities that were more open to their host societies in the West, where post-Enlightenment conceptions of rationality and the authority of science held sway, but failed to make much impression in those communities untouched by the Enlightenment or that chose to react against it, such as the traditional communities of Eastern Europe, and ultimately, the *haredi* world.

Given this background of solid support and precedents for Jewish magic in classical and central Jewish texts, it is perhaps not surprising that magical or quasi-magical activity (using our etic definition) is not only tolerated but quite common in the British Orthodox Jewish community, particularly in the *haredi* sector, nor that it is often not regarded as magical by its practitioners. Compared with much rabbinic or mediaeval Jewish magic, the practices of the women who responded to my questionnaire were quite low-key: I found no trace of any aggressive or erotic magical practices at all. Most of the practices were apotropaic or protective in nature, with a focus on promoting marriage, fertility, easy childbirth, health, and general welfare—all non-controversial aims central to most Jewish women's understanding

⁹⁸ Ibid., 428.

⁹⁹ For a discussion of this category, see *ibid.*, 382-5. Not all the practices listed as belonging to it (e.g. in BT *Shabat* 6-7) would fall into the etic category of magic used here, but it is interesting to note that one of the practices specified is that of tying red thread on people or things—a custom familiar to four-fifths of the survey sample.

¹⁰⁰ See Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation*, and the review by Diamond, 'Maimonides contra Kabbalah'.

of their roles. A conspicuous departure from classical Jewish magical techniques was the sparse amount of written and verbal activity used by these women: classical Jewish magic focuses upon the recitation of spells and formulae (sometimes involving biblical verses) and the writing of amulets and other magical documents. In contrast, only 29 customs from my survey involved recited or written words in any form (whether magical or not), and these fall into three groups:

Group 1

- Pray in one's own words (under the marriage canopy for others to marry; during labour for others to have children; at the grave of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel in order to find a mate;¹⁰¹ for 40 days at the Western Wall to obtain one's desire)
- Recite biblical or classical texts (Psalms, Song of Songs, *Perek shirah* - to get married; when pregnant; during labour; to heal sickness; to obtain one's desire; recite one's verse in the *Elokai netsor* prayer¹⁰²)
- Recite the liturgy or *tkhines* (recite *tkhines* to get pregnant; say *amen* and *yeheh shemeh raba mevorakh* with devotion to obtain one's desire)
- Recite 'special prayers' (unspecified) during pregnancy

Group 2

- Wear an amulet (adults and children)
- Place the name of a sick person under the circumcision pillow
- Place a prayerbook or 'holy book' under the pillow during pregnancy¹⁰³
- Place a copy of the book *No'am elimelekh* under pillow during birth¹⁰⁴
- Check *mezuzot* for errors (against the evil eye; in cases of illness; in case of infertility; to get married; for any problem)
- Check parents' *ketubah* (marriage contract) for errors if experiencing difficulty in getting married¹⁰⁵

Group 3

- Boys come to house to recite Shema and/or Psalms in the week before a baby's circumcision
- Study the Zohar and/or sing songs in the house the night before a circumcision
- Receive a blessing from a 'holy rabbi' to get pregnant
- Read *maftir*¹⁰⁶ on Yom Kippur for prosperity in the coming year

¹⁰¹ At Amuka, in Israel; see Sasson, 'From Unknown Saint to State Site'.

¹⁰² See above, n. 57.

¹⁰³ The 'holy book' may be *Sefer razi'el hamalakh*, a mediaeval kabbalistic grimoire, often used for protecting pregnant women; a message on the EdgwareK email list posted by a woman in November 2011 asked to borrow a copy of this (misspelled as *Raziel hamelekh!*) and of *No'am elimelekh* (see below, n. 104) 'for a few weeks', clearly for this purpose.

¹⁰⁴ A well-known hasidic Torah commentary by R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (1717-87). For its magical properties, see Nigal (ed.), *No'am elimelekh*, i. 13.

¹⁰⁵ I have found no other reference to this belief, though there seems to be a (modern) kabbalistic belief that mistakes in a *ketubah* can cause childlessness; see Hirsch, 'N.Y. Kabbalist Combs Ketubot for Mistakes'.

¹⁰⁶ The 'additional' Torah reading; the man honoured with this also reads the prophetic portion.

Say the *atah horeita* verses¹⁰⁷ on Simhat Torah for prosperity in the coming year

When we examine these practices, it becomes apparent that the majority of texts or words to be recited are either prayers from the standard liturgy or *tkhines*, biblical or classical texts, or personal prayer on behalf of oneself or others. No magical texts appear at all in the first group. The second group reveals the use of written material as amulets or in an amuletic manner, approximating more closely to classic Jewish magical techniques. However, the women only use, and do not produce, the texts involved (nor do they even read them), and except for the use of amulets (of unspecified character) and the possible use of *Sefer razi'el hamalakh*, a classic magical text, all the texts used are non-magical in nature: the prayerbook, a hasidic Torah commentary, *mezuzot*,¹⁰⁸ a slip of paper with an individual's name, and the *ketubah*. The checking of *mezuzot* and the parents' *ketubah* reflects an (etically defined) magical principle that written words have power in and of themselves, strongly supported by classical Jewish sources that view Hebrew as 'the language of creation' and immensely powerful.¹⁰⁹ Although Maimonides, who has a non-essentialist view of Hebrew, might argue about this,¹¹⁰ it would be difficult to classify it as a magical belief in emic terms. The third group, with five practices, actually includes customs associated with men, from a 'holy rabbi' giving a blessing to promote conception to male performance of festival liturgy that promotes prosperity;¹¹¹ they cannot be classified as women's practices even though they were reported by women.

Women's understandings of customs and practices

Though several practices recorded in the survey could definitely be classed as magical in terms of a 'commonsense' etic definition, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter Jewish women think about the wide range of customs reported in much

¹⁰⁷ A series of biblical verses recited when the Torah scrolls are taken out of the Ark before the *hakafot* (circuits), during which men carry and dance with the scrolls.

¹⁰⁸ Though *mezuzot* can be regarded as magical according to both etic and emic definitions (see above, n. 94), they are primarily regarded as biblical commandments.

¹⁰⁹ e.g. in *Sefer yetsirah* (of early though uncertain date), the thought of Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141), for which see Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation*, 155-8, and in kabbalistic tradition.

¹¹⁰ Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation*, 159-78.

¹¹¹ Women would be barred from reading *maftir* or reciting the *atah horeita* verses in almost every Orthodox synagogue.

more diverse and nuanced ways than merely classing them as ‘magical’ or ‘non-magical’. Their attitudes include complete, uncritical trust in the practices’ efficacy and belief in their authenticity; the reinterpretation of some practices in psychological or spiritual terms; the imposition of a sharp division between ‘halakhic’ or meritorious practices and ‘superstitions’ or even harmful practices; uncertainty about their effectiveness, leading to performance as a kind of insurance policy; and acceptance of the ‘commonsense’ view of these practices as ‘magical’ and ‘superstitious’. We will examine these responses in more detail below.

Many of those most committed to these practices came from the *haredi* sector, and would occasionally demonstrate the authentic nature of the practices by telling me ‘miracle stories’ about the successes, or *yeshuot*, they had brought. We may take as an example Menucha Mizrahi, a grandmother from a hasidic family married to a Sefardi rabbi, who performed more customs (83) than any other respondent and was utterly convinced of their efficacy. Telling me about her weekly baking of *halot* as part of a group of 40 women who do this in the merit of the sick, she reported: ‘We get back stories—a woman had stage 4 cancer. They gave her three months to live. It’s wiped out the cancer.’¹¹² She was very reluctant to suggest any boundary between permitted and forbidden or magical practices and did not characterize any of the customs on the questionnaire as unacceptable. Both she and family members had consulted Rebetsn Aidel Miller, an Israeli specialist in the *blay gisn* anti-evil eye technique who advertises in and periodically visits both the UK and the USA; for Menucha, the effectiveness and permissibility of the practice was guaranteed by the fact that Rebetsn Miller has letters of approval from famous rabbis, and she treasured some special leaves given to her as a protective charm by the *rebetsn*. Such practices structure and give meaning to her religious life: she spends a lot of time performing them on behalf of people who are sick, have no job, are infertile, or are having difficulty finding a marriage partner. She estimated that she was praying for about 150 people every day, as well as visiting the tomb of the Shotser *rebbe* in Enfield every Friday,¹¹³ where she lights two candles for the ascent of his soul, and extra candles for the people for whom she is praying. In addition, she takes part in a group

¹¹² This and following quotations come from an interview with Menucha Mizrahi.

¹¹³ R. Shulem Moshkovits (d. 1958), a Romanian hasidic *rebbe*, whose grave has become a place of pilgrimage. See Ch. 1 p. 11.

project to help people find marriage partners: she has taken responsibility for praying for two individuals, as well as learning the laws concerning gossip (*leshon hara*) and participating in round-the-clock ‘*leshon hara* watches’,¹¹⁴ in which people sign up to refrain from speaking any *leshon hara* for a set period, in order to accumulate merit on others’ behalf. She also bakes *halah* every week and gives it to needy families or the elderly, to accumulate merit for sick people. For Menucha, performing these practices and involving herself in her synagogue’s ladies’ guild embody the essence of her mission as a Jewish woman—to help and nurture others—and she was very conscious of this as a special and holy role for women, with biblical models:

Through the prayers of the women, *nashim tsidkaniyot* [righteous women], like the women in Mitsrayim [Egypt], who got us [redeemed from slavery], if you believe I think it does help, and how many people we’ve seen who didn’t have *zivugim hagunim* [good marriages], didn’t have *shidukhim* [marriage partners], and thank God! I’m not saying that one particular thing works, but everything put together, [like] baking *halah* with 40 women.

In contrast, Sarah Segal, another hasidic woman, expressed religious reservations about such customs and the *do ut des* attitude they imply, while avoiding any condemnation of women who do practise such things:

I’m not a custom person actually. I *do* do things, I do lots of the customs that I was born into, those *minhagim* and things like that, but, if say for example I had an issue about something I’d rather look at it and see what is the issue about, I’ll take it apart rather than say, ‘OK I’m going to now do this and this and this’, I don’t run for *segulot*, so much. [...] I do think it’s got a lot of meaning, and I think they’re good things to do, but I don’t like to sort of barter with God, that’s the way I like to see it. [...] I see it as a bit immature, to be honest, I feel it’s like a little bit immature, because God doesn’t just want actions, He wants the heart.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, she did perform thirty customs from the questionnaire, particularly those relating to protection during pregnancy, and the avoidance of death. She differed from Menucha in giving spiritual and theological meanings to several customs, occasionally linking them:

¹¹⁴ Other women mentioned this practice to me; it appears to be recent in origin, and is popular both among *haredi* and observant Modern Orthodox women. The popularization of two books on the laws of gossip, *Hafets hayim* and *Shemirat halashon*, both translated into English, by R. Israel Me’ir Hakohen (1838-1933) probably underlies this.

¹¹⁵ Sarah Segal, interview.

Change of name, that's very meaningful. Your name is everything, your name is your whole being, it's your whole persona, if you change your name you change your *mazl* [fortune] [...] there's a name that we call each other as friends, the way people know you, then there's a name that you call yourself, that's how you know yourself, and there's a name that God calls you, and there's a name that your parents call you. And the goal of life is to make all those four names meet—that's why people say the *pasuk* [verse] of their name in Shemoneh-Esrei,¹¹⁶ because you can't come up to the next world and say 'You know my name is Sarah Segal', there's no surnames there, but if you know your *pasuk* then you might recognize the potential of what you could have been. It's quite awesome, so many people don't fulfil their potential while they're here, so when they come up to the next world there's a shock, like 'I could have been *that*', but if you say your *pasuk* at least you'll recognize, because then the Hebrew name is the potential. So that's what we *hope* we can arrive at, the potential that God had in mind for us.

Sarah starts with the well-known idea that a person's (Hebrew) name embodies their essence,¹¹⁷ and that changes in the name bring about changes in the person's life and fortune (hence the common custom of changing someone's name if they fall ill). However, she then links this custom and its underlying concept to the practice of reciting a biblical verse whose first and last letters match those of one's name, and gives this her own interpretation: each individual possesses four names that reflect aspects of his or her identity—social, personal, familial, and divine—which should ideally be united in order for the individual to achieve their true potential, as known to God and apparent in the afterlife. Recitation of the verse enables one to acquire knowledge of this potential and work towards it. Perhaps taking the original idea behind the practice—that post-mortem knowledge of one's name, for which the verse recitation is a *segulah*, can save one from the pains of hell—as a starting-point, Sarah reinterprets it as a way of intensifying spiritual progress and perfection.¹¹⁸ She applied the same process of resignification to the practice of hiding pregnancy:

I think hiding pregnancy [is important], I've only had one child but because modesty is such an important part of the Jewish religion, and anything that's hidden has just got more blessing [...] I mean not hiding pregnancy as in if you're pregnant you're going to be seen, but in the early stages of it ...

¹¹⁶ An alternative name for the *amidah* prayer, which ends with the paragraph *Elokai netsor*, where the 'name verse' is inserted.

¹¹⁷ BT *Yoma* 83b.

¹¹⁸ None of the other women who mentioned this custom provided any reason for it; I have no way of knowing whether Sarah built her novel interpretation on some knowledge of the original reason or whether she came up with it independently. See above, n. 57, for the original rationale behind this practice.

anything that's hidden from the eyes, obviously you've got more power to grow, that's a very strong and meaningful concept that I like.

Hiding pregnancy is usually interpreted (both in etic and emic terms) as protecting the mother and unborn child from the evil eye and other negative influences, but Sarah reconceptualizes the practice as linked to the central value of modesty and to more general concepts of promoting growth and blessing. A few other women also reinterpreted the significance of traditional customs, seeing them as opportunities for spiritual growth; not all were from the *haredi* sector. Miriam Rothman, a strongly feminist, young Modern Orthodox woman from a mixed Ashkenazi-Sefardi background, saw spiritual value in her Egyptian grandmother's customs:¹¹⁹

All sorts of other things, about not overpraising children, about you don't mention somebody's eyes, or somebody's achievements, *hamsa hamsa*,¹²⁰ and it reflects a sort of humility and avoidance of hubris in the face of the universe which is not understandable, and which you can't presume to fathom, and it's to remind you of your human littleness, and actually I think that's a very profound religious feeling that's important not to mock [...] so you may call it superstition but I think it reflects a very profound religious attitude.

Other women, particularly the more observant, were very careful to distinguish between correct or 'halakhic' customs, or ones for which there were sources, and practices that they regarded as 'superstitions', as we saw with Kate Moskovitz at the beginning of the chapter. Some women went further and characterized certain practices as potentially harmful. Sheila Dorfman, an observant United Synagogue member in her 60s,¹²¹ felt very strongly:

The idea that you check your *mezuzah* if someone's ill, I find very distasteful, I find it sick, absolutely sick. I hear these stories of people saying 'Oh my husband went blind in one eye and they said we should check the *mezuzah*, and when we checked it the word for eye was damaged', and I think to myself 'A God who makes somebody blind in one eye because the *mezuzah*

¹¹⁹ She performed 29 of those on the questionnaire.

¹²⁰ *Hamsa* (Arabic: 'five') is the Jewish name for an apotropaic hand-shaped ornament worn as an amulet. It is common among both Jews and Muslims (who call it 'the hand of Fatima') in North Africa, and is very popular in Israel and elsewhere; 19% of respondents had one in the house. Here Miriam is imitating her grandmother's apotropaic use of the amulet's name, parallel to the Yiddish phrase *keyn eyn-hore* ('no evil eye').

¹²¹ She performed 36 customs from the questionnaire.

had a mistake in the word for eye is not my God.’¹²² [...] So superstition, when it comes to *that* level of superstition, can be very very damaging, and I think we have to guard against those.¹²³

Sheila illustrates the conflicting attitudes and patterns of thought typical of non-*haredi* women who live simultaneously in a Western and a Jewish world, and struggle daily to negotiate between their contradictory demands. As she herself realized, having grown up in and feeling part of Western secular culture influenced her attitude to these practices, several of which she had abandoned even though her family had practised them:

Some of the more silly things which I felt were scientifically untenable, I sort of thought, that’s just silly really. So I suppose things which I feel in the modern day and age don’t have any scientific validity and don’t have any purpose—I think I probably gave up on all of them, the red ribbon and the spitting and the throwing the salt over my shoulder, but not because I consciously oppose them, just because they’re not who I am.

Though she did not mention feminism as an influence, feminist ideas were clearly an integral part of her worldview:

I think a lot of religion is *done* to women, and I think some of these things were dreamed up by men to keep women in their place, and in those instances I feel very strongly that they have to be put to bed, and put in their place and said ‘Yeah, well that was fine 200 years ago but actually it’s not who we are.’

On the other hand, she was reluctant to dismiss all practices that could not be rationalized:

I would never dismiss them out of hand because there are things out there that we don’t know about. I’m not at all cynical about aspects of religion which don’t appeal to me, I think well OK, that’s not for me but that doesn’t mean it can’t be right for other people, and it doesn’t mean that I’m not wrong in dismissing them.

¹²² Cf. the causal links between *mezuzot* and health documented in Roland Littlewood’s study of ‘hasidic therapeutics of the divine’ among the Lubavitch hasidim of Stamford Hill, in his *Religion, Agency, Restitution*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 75-6, 101-2.

¹²³ This and following quotations from Sheila Dorfman, interview. A young Sefardi woman who had just suffered a miscarriage told me that she wondered whether it had happened because of her failure to observe a *segulah* properly: a rabbi had told her to bake *halot* and give them away every Friday, but she had been busy on the Friday before the miscarriage and had put the *halot* in her freezer, intending to give them away after the sabbath. In such cases, it seems clear that certain practices can indeed have damaging psychological effects.

Sheila's efforts to find a balance between two worldviews that contrasted sharply in their evaluations of these customs were echoed by several of the other non-*haredi* women to whom I talked. Reluctant to denigrate or mock customs that they associated both with beloved family members and with tradition, they were often ill at ease when discussing their beliefs about such practices, or would laugh it off with the words, 'Well, it can't hurt!', admitting with embarrassment that they did still perform several of these customs as a sort of insurance policy, 'just in case'. These women are not quite sure what they should think, and receive contradictory messages from different spiritual leaders: *haredi* rabbis will assure them that these are holy and efficacious customs, while many non-*haredi* rabbis, like the Modern Orthodox rabbi referred to at the beginning of the chapter, will tell them they are superstitions that have no place within Judaism.

Even women who had no hesitation in classifying almost all the customs on the questionnaire as 'superstitions' shared this ambiguous reaction. Belinda Cohen, an observant United Synagogue member in her 60s, noted that 'Intellectually I think they're all nonsense', but when asked whether she had herself performed the rite of cutting the air with scissors in front of a child taking its first steps, reluctantly admitted: 'We did, I'm ashamed to tell you because it's so ridiculous!'¹²⁴ Stella James, an observant United Synagogue woman in her 50s, asserted, 'For me it's all completely crackpot superstition, all the things that I've ticked [on the questionnaire]', but admitted a paradoxical emotional attachment, linked to her sense of family and identity:

It just takes me back, it's a memory, of what it was like to be a little girl in my parents' home, and ... I'm not anybody's little girl any more, 'cos I don't have parents, I'm the top of the tree, and I don't have siblings to share these things with. [...] so when I hear those things it's lovely, it's nice, even though I think it's nonsense.

She also still observed one custom (avoiding placing the foot of a bed facing a door), and struggled to articulate why: 'That's the only thing I still do. It's not because I'm

¹²⁴ She was the only person who had done this though another 5% of respondents (including her daughter) had heard of the practice or had a family member who had done it.

superstitious about it, it's just kind of—it's there, my husband's family obviously did that as well [...] We don't even think about it, you know, we just ... don't.'

As noted above, Stella is very conscious of the difficulties involved in living in two worlds and doubtful about her identification as Orthodox,¹²⁵ and this inner conflict plays out in her contradictory feelings about the practices and beliefs she learnt from her family, as well as in her intellectual engagement in Jewish studies.

* * *

The investigation of women's customs and practices has yielded a rich set of data. In spite of the small sample size and qualitative nature of the information, it is possible to form a preliminary impression of the range and relative popularity of individual customs, and the balance between performance of and knowledge about them. Analysis of the women who are 'high performers' has demonstrated that, far from being marginal, ignorant or uneducated, they tend to be committed to greater religious observance, and typically belong to the *haredi* and Modern Orthodox groupings. In addition to disproving the stereotype that Sefardim are 'more superstitious' and confirming the assumption that most women learn these practices from older female relatives in a mimetic manner, the survey showed clear evidence of changing patterns of practice, with the decline of older customs more likely to be identified as magical or superstitious by women operating (partly) within a Western worldview, and the growth of more pietistic practices among young women with higher levels of formal Jewish education. Both *ba'alot teshuvah* (newly religious women) and younger, seminary-educated women typically use self-conscious techniques designed to form a pious self, like those described by Mahmood,¹²⁶ and these often include pietistic practices like those documented here.¹²⁷ Other factors that facilitate and shape change in women's religious lives include developing technology in the Western world, such as the replacement of domestic manufacture by industrial production, leading to the demise of customs associated with these

¹²⁵ See above, Ch. 1, p. 28.

¹²⁶ See Ch. 1, anthropological section of the literature review.

¹²⁷ No ascetic practices were reported; it seems unlikely that they would be regarded positively.

technologies (such as candlemaking or sewing), and the growing possibilities offered by the internet in spreading knowledge and performance of recently invented or expanded customs.

In addition to these advances in our knowledge of women's performance and familiarity with such customs, investigation of women's understandings of and feelings about these practices tends to confirm the hypothesis that there are three identifiable groups among British Orthodox women. *Haredi* women demonstrated a greater acceptance of and trust in the efficacy of these customs, in line with their general worldview, which prioritizes Jewish attitudes and values (defined largely by the male elite) over the Western, secular values of surrounding non-Jewish culture. Even among some *haredi* women, however, and much more so among the Modern Orthodox, the conflict between the two worldviews was palpable, with many of these women distinguishing between 'authentic', halakhically-based practices of which they approved, and 'irrational superstitions' (defined in Western terms), which they either did not practise or, in some cases, roundly condemned. Modern Orthodox women were the most likely to assess the worth of family customs and abandon those they felt had no religious value, as well as being the most likely to adopt new practices that they regarded as promoting spirituality and a positive religious ethos. In contrast, traditionalist women harboured ambivalent feelings about many of the customs, valuing them as family and community traditions that contributed to their sense of identity and scorning some as incompatible with their fundamentally Western worldview, but often confessing to practising them as a form of insurance, on the grounds that 'it can't hurt'.

Such inconsistencies are not restricted to women straddling Western and Jewish cultures.¹²⁸ Traditionalist women in particular, though principally Western in their education and thinking, are still inextricably linked to their Jewish identity, which often includes 'irrational' customs and practices for which they might struggle to find a rationale, but which they are committed to observing. Many of them commented that they 'never thought about these things', and were at a loss to explain why they practised them, but this does not mean that such practices are any less

¹²⁸ See Ch. 2 n. 103.

important to them; they help to create the intensely Jewish texture of daily life that underwrites and promotes a very real Jewish identity and sense of community, and are often viewed as essential elements in 'being Jewish'.

Lastly, in terms of questions of agency and creativity, these customs provide a fertile field for women to adapt, innovate, and interpret existing practices and to invent new ones to express their most urgent concerns and aims. As with some of the new communal rituals examined in Chapter 4, 'power' and 'strength' were often mentioned in connection with these customs, particularly by *haredi* women. Rather than constituting instances of resistance to male domination, such trends seem to express the women's desire to embody the notion of equal worth to that of men promoted by Orthodox apologists as a response to feminism. Although this is a defensive tactic adopted by male Orthodox writers, *haredi* women seem to have taken such claims of gender 'equality' literally, turning a blind eye to the very real inequalities of power and control in the Orthodox world while celebrating women's centrality within Judaism. While traditionalist women accept that they are marginalized in the religious sphere, but deal with it by a process of compartmentalization, and while many Modern Orthodox women resent their marginalization and work to change it, *haredi* women, in particular, enthusiastically assured me that women and men had equal, if different, roles within Judaism. Sarah Segal noted:

I think that they're equal in worth, men or women, but I see their roles as different. [...] The males are the foreign affairs minister and the women are the interior minister. So in effect the women actually effect the greatest changes in the home, and are much more dynamic internally, create much more, they can affect more by being in the background more, not because they have to be in the background but because that is the place where the greatest impact is made. [...] If you compare it for example to a generator, the more powerful generators will be hidden, whereas the lights will be out on the street. So I would describe women as a very dynamic and powerful creation.

Haredi women thus indirectly accept much of the feminist message while reinterpreting it *within* a patriarchal framework; this reinterpretation includes the creation of new women's activities, both communal and individual, which give women their 'hidden', generator-like power, paradoxically implying that they are

ultimately *more* powerful than men. New developments, such as the concept of ‘bankable’ merit earned by practising these customs, emphasize the way in which many *haredi* women, as well as some from the other groups, view the practice of rituals and customs as empowering them both to achieve new spiritual heights and to help others in their community, fulfilling their aims of nurturing and protecting others, which they see as the essence of women’s role. Since there are already hundreds of popular customs whose origins are obscure, and no authoritative body to approve or disapprove them, women (and men) can freely adapt, elaborate, alter, or even invent new practices and *segulot*, which find a ready audience among pietistically-minded Jews worldwide, whether by publication on websites devoted to *segulot*, local Orthodox email lists, Orthodox women’s blogs,¹²⁹ or via the numerous women’s websites, such as Imamother, that cater to *haredi* and observant Modern Orthodox women.

Women’s customs have thus proved a very fruitful field of research, revealing both change and continuity in women’s practice, as well as evidence of agency and theological and practical creativity, which can be compared and correlated with evidence from other spheres of women’s religious lives.

¹²⁹ See Lieber, ‘A Virtual *Veibershul*’, for details of the lively and expanding world of Orthodox women’s blogs.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This thesis began as an investigation into Orthodox Jewish women's customs, but rapidly evolved into a study of the nature of Jewish women's religious lives, the ways in which they are changing, and why. A combination of classic anthropological and sociological methodological strategies produced a rich array of data that have enabled me both to paint a detailed picture of Orthodox women in London and to problematize some theoretical and methodological issues, while building on and developing others. I will discuss my findings in relation to my three research aims, raising the associated theoretical and methodological issues and assessing the importance of my findings, and then explore the implications of my work for future research.

The first aim was to investigate the content of Orthodox women's religious lives, and to discover how women understand their role. My research reveals both that Orthodox women in London engage in a much wider and richer variety of religious activities than previously documented, in both public and domestic spheres, and that their understanding of their activities often differs from that of men. In addition to conventional domestic religious roles, women have initiated many new communal religious activities over the last thirty years and continue to develop new ones.

Examining women's accounts over this period has enabled me to trace change and development among Orthodox women's activities and self-perception—a feature of Orthodox women's religious lives that is under-researched. A previously undocumented 'women's renaissance' in the 1990s, influenced by second-wave feminism, included attempts to widen the scope of women's activities into the hitherto male territory of public prayer and to reshape women's role in ritual, but was largely blocked by the (male) Orthodox establishment. I have shown how a new wave of joint male-female activism advocating increased female participation in ritual activity began in 2013, with the first JOFA conference in Britain and the first publicized 'partnership *minyan*'. Although it is still too early to determine how this will influence women's religious lives, the high level of male support and co-operation it involves and the excitement generated among Modern Orthodox women are unprecedented. A major factor seems to be the higher level of Jewish education

characteristic of younger women, which has given them greater confidence and halakhic knowledge than the 1990s women.

Much Orthodox apologetic discourse describes family and home as central, but crucially, does not grant women positions of power within the home. Even though the domestic is described as women's principal sphere of influence and power, it is hierarchically organized along gender lines, with men performing almost all domestic rituals. Nevertheless, most Orthodox women I encountered do regard their domestic role as central, and essential to the preservation of the Jewish community, though they understand this differently from men (as did the women studied by Sered and Weissler). Many women believe that their role is actually more important than that of men; this may sometimes be a reaction to the perceived undervaluing of women and their activities, but for others, ideals of promoting and protecting family, community, and continuity are far more central to their understanding and experience of Judaism than 'male' ideals of Torah study, halakhic observance, and prayer.

This study has shown, especially in Chapter 5, that women frequently 'sacralize the everyday', as Sered found in her research, and sometimes develop their own theological interpretations of their activities, which tend to remain invisible to men—an aspect of Orthodox women's creativity rarely documented elsewhere.

Women preserve a surprisingly wide spectrum of customs and beliefs, many tolerated rather than approved of or promoted by the religious establishment, and most linked to the protection of their families. They show remarkable commitment to continuing these practices, even when labelled 'superstitions' or devalued by some religious authorities. My research (see Chapter 6) shows the range of these customs is gradually changing, with those that clash with Western liberal and rational ideas declining (such as the range of customs associated with protection against the evil eye), and those that conform to current, especially *haredi*, notions of piety on the rise (such as those that afford protection by engagement in prayer and ritual practices). This seems to be the result of both an increasing if silent acceptance of Western rationalism (including elements of feminism), and of changing patterns of Jewish education, with earlier, mimetically-based socialization in home and family giving

way to a more self-conscious, text-based education acquired in Jewish schools and seminaries (as documented in Chapter 6).

My second aim was to establish whether different groups of women could be identified within British Orthodoxy. While previous studies have often lumped all denominationally-defined Orthodox Jewish women together, my observations suggest that three subgroups—*haredi*, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist—exist, and that different patterns of belief, practice, and worldview characterize each group. This finding calls into question the methodology of categorization used in sociological studies of the ‘Orthodox community’ in general, since the groups I distinguished apply to men as much as women.

However, it must also be recognized that there is significant overlap between the groups, with increasing influence from the *haredi* domain ‘leftwards’ into traditionalist Orthodoxy as *haredi* rabbis occupy many United Synagogue pulpits, and *haredi* teachers dominate Jewish studies in United Synagogue schools attended by non-*haredi* children. With unprecedented numbers of Jewish children now attending these schools, younger women are exposed to largely *haredi* religious models and influences, and many identify Judaism with its *haredi* expression, whether or not they incorporate this into their own religious lives. This is a major factor in the current pattern of movement between Orthodox subgroups and across denominational boundaries (as explored in Chapter 2). There is often a sense of disconnection between older, traditionalist women, brought up with a more relaxed, mimetic model of Jewish life and more receptive to influences from the surrounding society (including feminist ideas), and younger women, who are more polarized; some adopt a *haredi* lifestyle, others leave Orthodoxy (either for denominations to its left, such as Masorti, or by abandoning religious practice), and a declining number opt for the traditionalist centre. A few adopt a Modern Orthodox approach that strives to integrate Jewish and Western values. This clearly has implications for the future character of Anglo-Jewry.

I have shown how *haredi* women generally adhere to well-defined ideologies that reject Western liberal influences, stress traditional Jewish gender roles and (increasing) gender separation, and valorize tradition and rabbinic authority. These

values have led them, more than the other two groups, to develop independent and novel women's rituals, particularly in the communal sphere, that promote pietistic practices as a means of healing the sick, combating infertility, solving economic problems, finding marriage partners, and protecting family and community. Though many of these rituals have little traditional basis, or combine traditional elements in innovative ways (and actually constitute examples of the 'women's spaces' advocated by feminists as encouraging women's autonomy), they are legitimated by rabbinic authorization, and have proved increasingly popular among *haredi* and traditionalist women alike, though they hold less appeal for the Modern Orthodox.

A novel theological approach has evolved in tandem in the *haredi* sector, developing older ideas about angels and the efficacy of sacred words in a quasi-magical direction that would be unlikely to receive rabbinic sanction, and of which rabbis seem to be unaware. The emphasis on gender segregation in the *haredi* world has led to mutually invisible and sometimes startlingly dissimilar male and female religious spheres, though in both individuals are expected to develop their personal spiritual lives and relationships with the divine.

In contrast, Modern Orthodox women have responded positively to Western feminist influences by seeking increased ritual participation, both in all-female contexts, as in women's *tefilah* groups, or, more recently, in partnership *minyanim*, in which both men and women play active roles. They typically focus on halakhic support or justification for women's involvement in standard ritual and public prayer, viewing traditional gender roles as largely dictated by sociological rather than halakhic considerations and thus open to (limited) change, and seeking a compromise between changing Western gender roles and halakhic restrictions on women's ritual performance, rather than full egalitarianism. Modern Orthodox women are more likely to stress text-based education for women both as a sacred practice and as a route to greater equality, and to seek individual religious satisfaction and increased spirituality. While by no means abandoning traditional conceptions of Jewish women's role in the home, they tend to expect both greater male participation in the domestic sphere and greater female participation in the public/ritual sphere. They view most rituals as open to both men and women, and put this into practice in both domestic and public contexts. They show little or no interest in the quasi-magical

rituals developed among *haredi* women, and are more likely to discard family customs on the basis of Western rationalist worldviews.

Modern Orthodox women are also the most vocal in expressing dissatisfaction with the current status of and opportunities for Orthodox women, and often actively seek change. The ‘women’s renaissance’ of the 1990s, based on Modern Orthodox ideas and practices in Israel and the USA (such as Rosh Hodesh groups and women’s *tefilah* groups), was initiated and promoted by women from this sector, but encountered opposition from largely *haredi* religious authorities. Lacking halakhic competence and textual Jewish knowledge, as well as male support, women of that period had few ways in which to defend their innovatory practices. In consequence, some women from this sector moved ‘leftwards’, to the Masorti movement, or abandoned the attempt to find a spiritual home in Orthodoxy. Today’s partnership *minyán* movement seems to be more resilient and may yet lead to wider changes in women’s roles.

I have also shown that, unlike both these groups, traditionalist women often express uncertainty, doubt, or even indifference in matters of belief and personal spirituality, but avoid innovation in religious practice. They prefer the status quo, often reacting with disapproval to Modern Orthodox attempts to increase women’s ritual participation, which they view as threatening their own identity. For a group that maintains Jewish customs and practices as the constitutive elements of their personal and communal identity, any change is liable to be regarded as an attack on that identity, unless authorized by traditional authority figures. It is noticeable that while few traditionalist women would consider participating in Modern Orthodox initiatives such as women’s *tefilah* groups or partnership *minyanim*, which lack official approval, several attend equally innovative *haredi* rituals such as *berakhah* parties, which enjoy rabbinic endorsement. Traditionalist women are often uninterested in *halakhah* as a guide to personal practice, and rely almost exclusively on mimetically-transmitted family and community tradition. This undergirds their opposition to practices such as women making *kidush* in public, which, while halakhically permissible, is ‘not done’ in most Orthodox communities. While *haredi* women would probably cite the central value of *tzeni’ut*, modesty, as justification for women’s non-performance of these rituals, traditionalist women worry that

acquiescence in (or worse, performance of) such rituals would endanger their own Orthodox identity in the eyes of others. With mimetic example as the basis of their practice, most traditionalist women are not interested in improving their Jewish education by means of text-based study in the ‘male’ style. This makes them more open to influence by rabbis from the *haredi* world than are Modern Orthodox women, who are more likely to have the halakhic knowledge with which to evaluate rabbinic directives concerning practice.

This analysis of the importance of differing worldviews for women’s self-understanding and ritual performance raises some problems for Mahmood’s recent critique of feminist approaches to non-liberal religious women and her assertions of such women’s agency in producing a ‘pious self’. Indeed, her analysis would only fit the *haredi* group, while ignoring women who struggle to reconcile Western liberal and *haredi* non-liberal worldviews and to integrate both in their religious self-understanding and practice (Modern Orthodox), and those whose religious identity is largely identical to their ethnic identity as members of a minority (traditionalists), for whom a ‘pious self’ is far less important than a ‘Jewish self’—a group for whom Morris’ analysis seems more relevant. In addition, Mahmood ignores much of the social and community dimension, which was of paramount importance to the women I studied and profoundly influenced their practice, as well as failing to acknowledge the very real limits to women’s agency constituted by structural gender inequality in patriarchal religious traditions. Here too, Morris provides a more flexible and appropriate account, focusing on the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion.

My last research aim was to assess the possibility of women’s religious creativity and agency in the Orthodox sphere, and how the constraints and opportunities of an inherently patriarchal system might influence this. The wide variety of women’s activities documented provide ample proof of women’s creativity, while interviews revealed that most Orthodox women felt that they did possess agency, though Modern Orthodox women also voiced resentment at the limitations on their freedom and power to shape their religious lives imposed by the (all-male) religious establishment. However, when a particular form of creative practice is blocked, Modern Orthodox women often prove very resourceful in adapting to rabbinic

restrictions in order to achieve at least some of their aims, whether by educating themselves in order to counter rabbinic opposition, accepting some limitations on their activities in order to make strategic gains, or coming up with new practices and formats that bypass rabbinic opposition (as do *haredi* women). Their agency is often shaped by the constraints of the system, but this makes it no less genuine, and often demands high levels of creativity precisely in order to adapt to the very real limitations on their religious activities, as in the model offered by Bell.

It is possible that *haredi* women also experience resentment of rabbinic authority, but if so, they do not voice it. In answer to the prevailing secular expectation of at least lip service to women's equality, *haredi* discourse sets up an ideal of 'different but equal', which both conceals and justifies the patriarchal distribution of power.

Women who consciously strive to shape their lives according to *haredi* ideals create rituals in the 'hidden' women's space that differ from public male rituals, and do not challenge them. Excluded from full participation in the male space of synagogue and Torah study, these women create new forms of small-group communal rituals, such as *berakhah* and *halah* parties, which serve as community-building social occasions and extend women's nurturing and protective role by their focus on healing and social cohesion. By actively seeking rabbinic approval and consent, *haredi* women defuse potential tensions in advance.

In both these groups, Bell's concept of rituals as 'a nexus of power relationships' can be usefully applied, as in both cases a complex pattern of male constraint and permission, and female innovation, acquiescence, negotiation, adaptation, and (occasional) subversion—rather than simple resistance—can be seen. Differing receptions of new rituals, and male resistance to any negotiation in central communal rituals, reflect the different configurations of power in the Orthodox community and attempts to alter them. Perhaps surprisingly, in the *haredi* sphere a process of negotiation with male authorities exists alongside women's desire to create pious selves—again, an area unexplored by Mahmood, who critiques the simplistic feminist binary opposition of 'dominance' and 'resistance' but does not analyse how women who fully subscribe to non-liberal systems work within them to achieve their aims, nor how those aims may have been influenced (even if unconsciously) by exposure to external, liberal factors. My research revealed that feminist thinking and

attitudes have influenced women and shaped their activities across the Orthodox spectrum, both as an unacknowledged influence and as a spur to counter-reaction; this may be a factor in the recent proliferation of *haredi* women's religious activities, for instance.

Women's creativity in more theological areas, such as beliefs about angels and the efficacy of thaumaturgic rituals, is far more subversive to rabbinic theological understandings, though this subversiveness is not a conscious aim. Since these innovative beliefs are expressed, if at all, among themselves rather than to rabbinic authority figures, who seem to be unaware of them, they do not constitute an overt threat to the establishment. Their development seems to be due to the increasing gender separation in *haredi* society and the rabbis' assumption that women interpret rituals and practices in the same way that they do. The overall effect of such beliefs makes women feel very powerful and central in safeguarding their families and communities.

Traditionalist women are the least creative—unsurprisingly, since their Jewish identity relies on the maintenance of the status quo. Some, however, do join in new activities developed by *haredi* or Modern Orthodox women, with a preference for the former type, guaranteed by rabbinic approval. Those traditionalist women who feel a lack of personal agency in the religious sphere seek it elsewhere, in non-Jewish spheres such as work, or in 'less religious' Jewish spheres such as voluntary work and community administration. For some, the contrast between the level of agency they experience within the Orthodox community and the much higher level they enjoy in wider, non-Jewish society has led to a weakening of religious affiliation or practice, while others continue to maintain the external communal indicators of Orthodox affiliation—maintaining a kosher kitchen, attending lifecycle and social events—while feeling a sense of alienation and loss. Since practice rather than belief serves as the yardstick of Orthodox affiliation, these women are 'invisible' misfits or dropouts from the Orthodox community. This section of the Orthodox community has not been identified before.

In general, however, women's creativity and spiritual expression are always shaped by the constraints of the patriarchal system within which they operate, not only in the

form of the rituals they create but also in terms of the goals to which they aspire. In addition to rabbinic and halakhic restrictions on their ability to innovate or extend their practice, Orthodox women also face social limitations and pressures; they want to remain in good standing within the Orthodox community, and will sacrifice personal spiritual aspirations to this end. As noted, women often focus on protecting and nurturing their families and communities in their communal rituals—a goal in harmony with the traditional ideal of women’s spiritual fulfilment in their role as wives and mothers. Personal spiritual fulfilment or satisfaction in participating in central Jewish rituals is often regarded as self-indulgent or the product of non-Jewish influences and tends to be viewed with suspicion by male Jewish authorities.

Much of my research reveals the need for further investigation and new fields of inquiry. Further research on the partnership *minyanim* as they develop will be essential, and should shed light on the role played by changing patterns of Jewish education and influences from the wider society, which in turn could prove useful in studying the way in which influences from the host society shape change in religious minorities. My observation that women understand the significance and centrality of their domestic roles in a different way from that in which men view this role goes some way towards answering Ardener’s question about ‘women and belief’, but more research is needed to deepen knowledge of women’s unique understandings and theological views, for instance as they relate to prayer. Further investigation could also gauge the extent of the differences between women’s and men’s theological views, especially in the *haredi* sphere, and test whether increased gender separation lies behind such developments. This too could be of significance in studies of theological uniformity or difference along gender lines in other faith communities.

My study of women’s customs, which revealed the decline of traditional protective practices and the rise of pietistic *segulot*, suggests that changes in women’s religious education shape even the most traditional and mimetically-based areas of practice; comparable research among women of other faiths could illuminate the role that changes in religious education play in women’s traditions elsewhere.

Methodological issues are raised by my subdivision of the Orthodox community into three groups. Existing, denominationally-based systems of Jewish social classification tend to conflate these into an unwieldy ‘Orthodox’ category, which needs to be refined and subdivided in order to reflect the real social geography of the community; I hope that my findings will contribute to efforts to develop a more productive set of terms that can be used to characterize relatively distinct subgroups. In addition, though there is considerable movement of individuals between these subgroups and across denominational boundaries within Judaism, this needs further investigation to establish both overall trends and the reasons for such movement. The identification of ‘invisible dropouts’ within the Orthodox community, who maintain Orthodox practice while abandoning religious belief, also opens up new areas of investigation; though some work has been done on *haredi* dropouts in New York, there is no scholarly account of such people in either the *haredi* or traditionalist sectors of the British Jewish community.

In the realm of theory, I have already noted above that Mahmood’s work, while groundbreaking, does not provide a satisfactory account of women from religious minorities in the West, who often strive to integrate the demands and expectations of two cultures, one Western liberal and the other non-liberal. Such women have not received much scholarly attention, but constitute an important category that should be studied more intensively. My research has shown some of the ways in which Orthodox Jewish women attempt to achieve a practical and religiously valid balance, and comparison of future studies of women from other religious minorities in the West should deepen our understanding of the strategies used, their level of success, and their implications for women’s religious agency. This should also enable analytical methods to be developed to take account of minority women, exploring the intersectionality of ethnicity and religion. In addition, our understanding would be enriched by more work on the ways in which non-liberal women bargain with patriarchal religious structures to achieve their goals, while fully supporting the existence and divine authority of the structures themselves. Evidence of this emerged from my analysis of *haredi* women’s ritual innovation and creativity.

To conclude: London’s Orthodox Jewish women inhabit a set of uncomfortably overlapping worlds, balancing between Western liberal and Jewish religious values;

male and female versions of Judaism; and majority British and minority Jewish status. In their acceptance of conformity and allegiance to the Jewish community, in their creativity in Jewish ritual and its interpretation, and in their ability to make spaces where their voices can be heard in a male-dominated Jewish society, Orthodox women demonstrate remarkable agency and adaptability in the face of numerous obstacles, as well as loyalty to their vision of their roles as nurturers and protectors.

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Appendix 1: List of interviewees

The research was conducted with the approval of the UCL Research Ethics Committee (project number 2578/001) and adhered to the standards required by the committee. All interviewees who were recorded received an information sheet listing their rights, including that of withdrawing permission for quotation at any time, and all signed an informed consent form allowing the recording material to be used. Some did not want to see transcripts of the interviews, while others did and marked sections that they did not want to be used, which were duly omitted. All participants were given pseudonyms except for a few who were happy for their own names to be used; in one case a pseudonym was used even though permission to use the real name had been granted, as it might have led to the identification of other interviewees whose names had been disguised. In a few cases minor details of the interviewees have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Leonie Adelman (pseudonym): a London-born divorcee in her late 50s, with no children. Grew up in an 'Adas' synagogue; joined the independent Yakar; now a United Synagogue member; traditionalist. Interviewed by phone, 25 August 2013.

Keturah Allweiss (pseudonym): married mother of 3 in her late 30s, from a Modern Orthodox background, educated at a Jewish primary school, a non-Jewish secondary school, and university. Lived 2 years in New York, where she got involved in a WTG. Set up a women's Megillah reading. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 21 March 2012.

Belinda Cohen (pseudonym): married mother of 3 daughters in her late 60s, from an observant London family, educated in non-Jewish schools and *heder*, and as a pharmacist. United Synagogue member, traditionalist; mother of Beatrice Levi (see below). Interview recorded 15 September 2010.

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen: retired rabbi of Stanmore and Canons Park United Synagogue. Married with 4 children. A central figure in the foundation of Stanmore Women's Tefillah Group in 1992. Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 22 December 2011.

Shirley Daniels (pseudonym): mother of 5 in mid-30s, married to a Sefardi rabbi; brought up in traditionalist London United Synagogue home; educated at Jewish primary school, *heder*, Bnei Akiva, non-Jewish secondary school (with a year at Carmel College), university. Became much more observant after her mother's illness. Trained *mikveh* attendant. Interview recorded 9 July 2012.

Sheila Dorfman (pseudonym): veteran Jewish studies teacher in her 60s, widowed and remarried, 3 daughters. Brought up in a small northern community in an observant family; educated in non-Jewish schools and *heder*, plus an MA in Jewish Studies. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 11 May 2011.

Caroline Deutsch (pseudonym): married mother of 3, in her mid-40s; from a traditional background in South London; United Synagogue member, traditionalist; leading member of community organizations, university educated. Interviewed 4 November 2013.

Fiona Inman (pseudonym): married, in 40s. United Synagogue member, sister of Caroline Deutsch (see above); from a traditionalist South London background but has become more observant; university educated. Interviewed by phone about baby blessings and Simhat Torah, 24 July 2013.

Stella James (pseudonym): married mother of 2 daughters, late 50s. From a traditional United Synagogue family in Ilford. Went to non-Jewish schools, *heder*, Bnei Akiva, UCL, and trained as a lawyer. United Synagogue member; started up a women's Megillah reading in her synagogue; traditionalist/Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded November 2010.

Sharon Jastrow (pseudonym): married mother of 4, in early 60s. Traditional background, from very small community; non-Jewish schools, *heder*, music college, teacher training. Central figure in the Rosh Hodesh movement. Joined Masorti after marrying a non-religious man. Interview recorded 22 November 2011.

Brenda Johns (pseudonym): married mother of 3, in 30s; United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Mixed background, with North African mother and Ashkenazi father. University educated. Phone interview and email correspondence on Megillah, 2012-13.

Ariella Julian (pseudonym): in 40s, unmarried. United Synagogue member; university educated. Phone interview on mourning practices, 10 October 2013.

Beatrice Levi (pseudonym): married mother of 2 sons and a daughter, in her 40s. From an observant United Synagogue family, educated at non-Jewish schools, *heder* and private Jewish lessons, plus university and teacher training. United Synagogue member, traditionalist, daughter of Belinda Cohen (above). Interview recorded 15 September 2010.

Rabbi Locardo (pseudonym): in 60s, *haredi* rabbi of Sefardi synagogue, of Iraqi origin. Interviewed 1 August 2011.

Sheyna Marcus (pseudonym): unmarried, in late 20s, from a family she classified as 'between Modern Orthodox and *haredi*'. Educated at Jewish schools, seminary, and university. Attends a *haredi* synagogue. Interview recorded 17 November 2011.

Katherine Marks (pseudonym): married with 4 children, in 50s, from a traditional Ilford family. Educated at non-Jewish schools, *heder*, Study Group, university, teacher training. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Leading Jewish educator. Interview recorded 10 November 2011.

Menucha Mizrahi (pseudonym): married to a Sefardi rabbi, mother to several children, in 60s. American-born, from a hasidic background. Educated in Jewish schools, and as a special needs teacher; has an MA in Jewish Studies. *Haredi*. Interview recorded 28 January 2013.

Kate Moskovitz (pseudonym): married to a rabbi, with 8 children, in 60s. From an observant family in a small provincial community. Educated at non-Jewish schools, *heder*, Bnei Akiva, secretarial training. Had lived in several provincial communities where her husband was rabbi; she sometimes taught *heder* and bat mitzvah girls. *Haredi*. Interview recorded 3 January 2011.

Alexa Neville: married with children, in 40s. From an observant United Synagogue family. Educated at non-Jewish schools, seminary, university. Organized two women's services at Cambridge in 1988. Modern Orthodox Now lives in Israel. Skype interview 6 January 2013.

Nicola Perlman (pseudonym): married with 3 children, in 60s. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox/traditionalist. Educated at non-Jewish schools, *heder*. One of the founders of the Stanmore Women's Tefillah Group. Interview recorded 16 February 2011.

Flora Rendberg (pseudonym): Sefardi, married to an Ashkenazi, with one son, in 60s.

From an observant London family from Gibraltar. Educated at a Jewish primary school, a non-Jewish secondary school, *heder*, and *ulpan*. A mix of traditionalist and Modern Orthodox, belongs to a Sefardi synagogue.

Interviews recorded 26 and 31 July 2010.

Miriam Rothman (pseudonym): married with a baby son, in 30s. Grew up in a traditional family in a small provincial community, with an Ashkenazi father and a Sefardi mother. Educated at non-Jewish schools, *heder*, study group, seminary, university; trained as a lawyer. Involved in running the Grassroots cross-denominational community. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 18 November 2012.

Lesley Sandman (pseudonym): married with 2 daughters, in 60s. From an observant family in New York. University educated, MPhil in comparative semitics. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 21 November 2012.

Sarah Segal (pseudonym): married to an American Satmar *hasid*, with one son, in 30s. From a Satmar hasidic family in London. Educated at Jewish schools, seminary. Lives in Stamford Hill in the Satmar community. Interview recorded 17 February 2011.

Linda Stone (pseudonym): married with 3 children, in 60s. From a very observant family in a large provincial community. Educated in Jewish and non-Jewish schools, university. Was a United Synagogue member (her husband still is), attended Masorti services for some time but does not identify herself as religious any longer. Prominent figure in the Rosh Hodesh movement of the 1990s. Interview recorded 25 July 2011.

Bernice Susser (pseudonym): married with 2 sons and a daughter, in 30s. Secular schools, trained nurse. United Synagogue member, Modern Orthodox. Interview recorded 29 January 2013.

Perle Taubman (pseudonym): married with several children and grandchildren, in late 60s. From a traditional family in a large provincial community, educated at non-Jewish schools and university. Became more religious after her marriage, and eventually joined Lubavitch with her husband. Lives in Stamford Hill. Interviews recorded 17 February and 15 March 2011.

Dr Tamra Wright: Director of Academic Studies at London School of Jewish Studies, founder and director of the Susi Bradfield Educational Leadership programme for women. Married with 2 children, Modern Orthodox. Interviewed 18 October 2013.

Consulted in person or by email, but not interviewed (all pseudonyms)

Bracha Abelman, young Modern Orthodox mother of 3 in 20s.

Gill Armstrong, United Synagogue member in 70s.

Hannah Augsberger, young Modern Orthodox mother.

Zelda Ehrlich, *haredi* grandmother, in 70s.

Gwen Fishman, traditionalist United Synagogue member, in 60s.

Deborah Greenbaum, young newly religious *haredi* woman in 20s

Cherie Jackson, ex-United Synagogue member, now Masorti, in 60s

Liora Lachsman, unmarried woman in 40s, from hasidic background but university educated and is an academic

Shira Lemberg, *haredi* mother in 50s

Hannah Zeved, *haredi* mother in 40s

Appendix 2: First page of customs questionnaire

CUSTOM CHECKLIST

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I would be very grateful if you could fill out this questionnaire: it consists of a few questions about your background, and then a list of all sorts of Jewish customs, roughly ordered by the occasion with which they are linked.

Please tick the appropriate box ('I've heard of this' OR 'I do this/had this done to me' OR 'Someone in my family does this/did this') for each custom. If someone in your family practises a certain custom, please say who (e.g. 'mother', 'aunt'). Do feel free to add any comments in the box (or on the back of the sheet/margins if you need more room, but do please note which custom you're commenting on), and add any customs I've left out that you know about in the blank rows or at the end of the sections.

Thank you very much indeed,

Lindsey

Name & contact details (OPTIONAL):

Age: 18-30 ; 31-40 ; 41-50 ; 51-60 ; 61-70 ; 70+

Place of birth:

Grandparents' place of birth:

Mother's mother:

Mother's father:

Father's mother:

Father's father:

AVOIDING THE EVIL EYE OR ENSURING GOOD LUCK

Custom	I've heard of this	I do this/had it done to me	Someone in my family does this/did this	Comment/ extra information
Spitting				
Saying 'tfu tfu tfu' or 'po po po'				
Using salt				
Kissing a child 3 times & spitting between each kiss				

Appendix 3: List of customs from the questionnaire with bibliographical annotations

MA = evidence exists of this custom being practised in the mediaeval period
NJ = custom documented in a non-Jewish context

Avoiding the evil eye or ensuring good luck

Spitting	Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 159; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 373 (NJ)
Saying 'tfu tfu tfu' or 'po po po'	
Using salt	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 339; Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8, ch. 9; Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 160 (MA, NJ)
Kissing a child 3 times & spitting between each kiss	
Tying red thread on things	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 326-7; Teman, 'Red String' (NJ)
Sewing red thread in wedding dress	Teman, 'Red String'
<i>Blay gisn</i> (lead pouring)	German New Year fortune-telling custom; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 228-9 for divining cause of illness & future spouse (NJ)
Spitting on fingertips	
Not praising children	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 314-5 (NJ)
Avoiding pictures of birds	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 25-6; Peter Berbegal, 'Birds of Ill Omen' < http://www.jewishquarterly.org/issuearchive/article2ca6.html?articleid=195 > (NJ)
Avoiding green	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 181-2 (NJ)
Not counting children	See Ch. 6; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 101-2 (NJ)
Using garlic	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 172-3 (NJ)
Having a <i>hamsa</i> in the house	Sabar, 'From Sacred Symbol'
Hiding things (e.g. salt, flour, oil) in a new house	Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8, ch. 9
VARIANT: Bring these into new home & candles & sugar	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 204-5; Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8, ch. 9; Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 161 (MA, NJ)
Using a special stone	
Wearing an amulet (<i>kamea</i>)	Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , <i>passim</i> (NJ)
Lick eyelids/ forehead against evil eye	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 374 (NJ)
Putting money in new purse given as present	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 188-9 (NJ)
Avoiding red	Moses Isserles (Rema, 1520-72), comment on Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , 'Yoreh de'ah' 178: 1; Shabetai Hakohen (1621-62), <i>Sifteï kohen</i> (178: 3)
Not counting money in your purse	

Not looking in people's eyes
 Not wearing gold
 Checking *mezuzot* Sperber, *Minhagim*, vol. 8; sources quoted there include *Mekhilta* 'Pis'ha' 11, BT *Men.* 33b, JT *Pe'ah* 1: 1 17d (MA)
 Not giving knives as a present Opie, *Dictionary*, 217-8 (NJ)

During pregnancy

Wearing an apron
 Not looking at animals or ugly people on way home from mikveh so as not to have a deformed child Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 61; Opie, *Dictionary*, 317-8; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 187 (MA, NJ)
 Party in 5th month & preparing baby clothes Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 70-1; Pomeroy, 'Desde la cuna', 64
 Hiding pregnancy Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 70
 Not making any preparations before the birth Opie, *Dictionary*, 315 (NJ)
 Going to the *mikveh* in the 9th month Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 76
 Wearing a red string around waist Practised in Mexico, India, elsewhere (NJ)
 Wearing a Torah binder round waist (after earlier miscarriage) Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 92 (MA?)
 Putting *sidur* or holy book under pillow Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 93; *Sefer Razi'el*; Sabar, 'Childbirth and Magic', 674
 Not telling people the due date
 Having someone good touch you as you leave *mikveh*
 Husband having *petihah* (opening the ark) during 9th month Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 122; see Sperber, *Minhagim*, vol. 3, p. 127
 Taking *halah* in 9th month
 Not wearing gold
 Wearing *even tekumah* (special stone) against miscarriage BT *Shab.* 66b; Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 92; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 133-4; cf. Opie, *Dictionary*, 129 (eaglestone, which aids conception, pregnancy, birth)
 Special prayers Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 88-9; Weissler, *Voices*
 Treading on cut toenails causing miscarriage BT *Nidah* 17a-b and *MK* 18a; Klein, *A Time to Be Born*, 86; see
 <<http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/segulos>> for extensive discussion of fingernail customs (accessed 14 Dec. 2014)

Birth

Bake a cake during labour to help others get pregnant	No evidence; perhaps linked to a recent non-Jewish custom, first mentioned in the novel <i>The Birth House</i> , by Ami McKay (2010) (?NJ)
Opening drawers, cupboards etc.	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 27 (NJ)
Untying knots	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 122; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 221 (ancient; MA,NJ)
Praying during labour for childless friends	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 125 (modern?)
If baby is breach, checking all holy books are right way up	
Not to reveal baby's name till circumcision or till father is called to the Torah in synagogue	Cf. Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 278 (before christening) (NJ)
Putting a copy of Elimelekh of Lyzhansk's <i>No'am elimelekh</i> under pillow for birth as instructed by <i>rebbe</i>	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 123, 150 (citing <i>Sefer razi'el</i>)
Husband gets <i>petihah</i> of <i>Anim zemirot</i> on Shabat <i>mevarkhin</i>	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 122
Recite or listen to <i>Shir hama'alot</i> (Psalm 126) during labour	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 116, 123, 152

Babies and small children

Amulet (<i>kamea</i>) on or near child	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 155
Not taking a baby out for first 30 days	
Not cutting baby's nails for first week /30 days	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 274 (for 1st year) (NJ)
Yeshiva boys invited in to sing psalms and say <i>shema</i> for 1 st week	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 171, 172
Waving sword around room for first week	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 153; Pomeroy, 'Desde la cuna', 65; Sabar, 'Childbirth and Magic', 698
Studying Zohar and/or singing songs the night before circumcision	Pollack, <i>Jewish Folkways</i> , 19 (<i>vakhnakht</i>), Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 157, 171; Pomeroy, 'Desde la cuna', 65
Sefardi custom of welcoming baby girl on 30 th day	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 189 (<i>fados, hatas</i>)
Ashkenazi custom of welcoming girls with 'Hollekreisch'	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 190; Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 172; Baumgarten, <i>Mothers and Children</i> , 93-9; Hammer, 'Holle's Cry'
Red thread on cot or clothes	Teman, 'Red Strings'

Cutting air with scissors in front of child's first steps	
Giving more than one name	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 200, 208-9; Leissner, 'Jewish Women's Naming Rites'
Name selection – deep kabbalistic calculation, done by <i>rebbe</i> on which names to give	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 200; Leissner, 'Jewish Women's Naming Rites'
<i>Mohel's</i> knife placed under baby's mattress night before circumcision (to ward off Lilith)	cf. Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 160
Girl's ears pierced in first 30 days to enhance eyesight	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 101; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 176 (children and men) (NJ)
Father visits <i>mikveh</i> on morning of circumcision	
Boys come in night before circumcision	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 171, 172, 179-80, 181, 183, Pollack, <i>Jewish Folkways</i> , 19-20

First period

Mother slaps daughter	Lithuanian? < http://ausis.gf.vu.lt/eka/customs/youth_ini.html >
Mother pulls daughter's ear	
Not touching cut flowers	

Medical or illness

For teething: hanging animal tooth round child's neck	Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 133
Measles or smallpox: throw 10 peas on patient	
Not stepping over people sitting on floor (and 'unstepping' if you do)	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 377 (NJ)
Say psalms (on own or in groups)	
Change sick person's Hebrew name	BT <i>RH 16b</i> ; Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , 'Yoreh de'ah' 335: 10 and Isserles' comment there; Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 204-5
Take on extra <i>mitsvah</i>	
Eye styes: cotton pad soaked in wine/tea	
For styes: rub gold ring round eye	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 175 (NJ)
Warts: rub raw meat/tie string round with knots corresponding to warts & bury in ground	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 422-3 (NJ)
Jaundice – place pigeons on belly	Fred Rosner, <i>Biomedical Ethics and Jewish Law</i> , 491-502; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 308 (NJ)
Chicken soup	Klein, <i>A Time to Be Born</i> , 165

Checking <i>mezuzot</i>	Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8: and sources there, including <i>Mekhilta</i> ‘Pis’ha’ 11, BT <i>Men. 33b</i> , JT <i>Pe’ah</i> 1: 1 17d Cf. Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 169, 172
Light 10 candles to keep evil spirits at bay	
Taking <i>halah</i> in someone’s <i>zekhut</i> (merit)	
Death and funerals	
Not pouring water ‘backwards’ as that’s how it’s poured on the dead	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 314 (NJ). A member of a burial society reported this is <i>not</i> how it is done for the dead.
Not wearing socks around the house	
Not sitting on the floor	
Breaking the journey home after a funeral (e.g. going into a shop)	Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 179; Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 171 (NJ); Sperling, <i>Ta’amei haminhagim</i>
Not having foot of bed face the door	For extensive discussion, see < http://www.rabbiweisz.com/ask-the-rabbi/ask-the-rabbi-2/ > (accessed 25 June 2013); see also Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 15-16 (NJ)
Making person eat something or chew a button if you sew something on them	Sperling, <i>Ta’amei haminhagim</i> , 571; NJ versions common on internet
Not cutting fingernails & toenails on the same day	Gumbiner, <i>Magen avraham</i> , 260; see < http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/segulos > for extensive discussion of fingernail customs (accessed 14 Dec. 2014)
Not serving cake without a doily	
Not eating boiled eggs	
Not walking on graves	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 181 (NJ); Ganzfried, <i>Kitsur shulhan arukh</i> 199: 14
If you sneeze when mentioning the dead you must pull your ears up	
No arum lilies in house	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 443 (NJ)
Women not going to funeral	Zohar, ‘Vayakhel’, 196; Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> ‘Yoreh de’ah’ 359: 1-2
Pregnant women not going to shiva	
Not sewing your <u>own</u> clothes while wearing them	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 87 (NJ)
Pregnant women not going to funeral	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 181 (NJ)
People who have living parents not going to cemetery	This seems to contradict earlier practice; see Weissler, <i>Voices</i> .
Not cutting nails on Thursday	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 275 (NJ); see < http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/segulos > for extensive discussion of fingernail customs (accessed 14 Dec. 2014)
Not cutting nails in order	Trachtenberg, <i>Jewish Magic</i> , 191 (MA); see < http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/segulos > for extensive discussion of fingernail customs (accessed 14 Dec. 2014)

Covering mirrors at *shiva*
Bang in nail to *shiva* chair when
one gets up from *shiva*

Opie, *Dictionary*, 250 (NJ)
Chabad website:
<http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/371151/jewish/The-Last-Day-of-Shiva.htm> (accessed 24 June 2014)

No *hespedim* (eulogies) for fear
the *satan* will use them against
the dead

Leaving *yizkor* if your parents
are still alive
Washing hands after funeral or
cemetery visit

Moss and Cappannari, *Mal'occhio*, 7

Not wearing clothing of a dead
person

Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 179;
<<http://www.thejc.com/judaism/rabbi-i-have-a-problem/69638/should-i-wash-my-hands-after-a-funeral>>
Opie, *Dictionary*, 87 (NJ); Sperber, *Jewish Lifecycle*, 509-11
(shoes)

To get married

Check *mezuzot*

Sperber, *Minhagim*, vol. 8 (MA): and sources there including
Mekhilta 'Pis'ha' 11, BT *Men. 33b*, JT *Pe'ah* 1: 1 17d
<<http://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/2014/02/03/a-segulah-to-get-married/>> (accessed 23 June 2014); shown in Israeli TV series
Serugim (2008-12)

Having a *kidush* at synagogue if
your parents didn't make one for
you when you were born
Taking a fragment of a plate
broken at a *tena'im* (betrothal)
ceremony

Harvey E. Goldberg, *Jewish Passages: Cycles of J Life*
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 131; Ozzie
Nogg, 'Shtetl engagement custom makes modern comeback',
Jewish Journal, 10 Oct. 2008; Y. D. Eisenstein, *Otsar dinim
uminhagim* (1917), 438 (no mention of *segulah*); Sperber,
Jewish Lifecycle, 153 (men); Sperber, *Minhagim*, vol. 5, pp. 58-
61 (men)

Drinking from *sheva berakhot*
cup

<<http://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/2014/02/03/a-segulah-to-get-married/>> (accessed 23 June 2014)

Bride praying for unmarried
friends under wedding canopy
Checking whether there's an
error in parents' *ketubah*

<<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/5996/n-y-kabbalist-combs-ketubot-for-mistakes/>> (accessed 2 July 2014)

Mother may not have gone to
mikveh

Saying psalms (on own or in
groups)

Drinking from wine cup at
circumcision

Don't sit on a table or you'll get
a stupid husband

Opie, *Dictionary*, 390 (NJ: won't get married)

(variation: at corner of table)

Don't speak while eating or
you'll get a stupid husband

Saying *Perek shirah* 40 days in
row

Recent?

Saying Song of Songs every

Friday night

Praying at grave of Yonatan ben
Uziel at Amuka, Israel

<<http://torahideals.com/2009/06/18/the-mystical-power-of-amuka/>> (accessed 12 May 2014);
<<http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Judaism/Amuka-A-Legend-for-Lovers-315396>> (accessed 12 May 2014)

Bride & groom not seeing each other for 7 days before wedding	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 40 (NJ); only Ashkenazim
Not to try on wedding ring before wedding	
Man gets <i>gelilah</i> (honour of fastening the Torah scroll) on Rosh Hashanah in order to get engaged	
Bride throws bouquet to unmarried friends	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 41 (NJ)
Bride gives her own jewellery to unmarried friends at wedding to wear during <i>hupah</i>	< http://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/2014/02/03/a-segulah-to-get-married/ > (accessed 23 June 2014)

Miscellaneous

‘Sneeze on the truth’	Many references on internet (NJ), including < http://psychiclibrary.com/beyondBooks/sneezing-superstition > (accessed 4 Dec. 2014)
Don’t drink havdalah wine or you’ll grow a beard/get hair on chest	Ari Z. Zivotofsky, ‘Wine from Havdalah, Women and Beards’, <i>Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought</i> , 10 (2010), 175-87, available at < http://www.hakirah.org/Vol%2010%20Zivotofsky.pdf > (accessed 4 Dec. 2014)
Hold the havdalah candle as high as you want your husband to be	Recently reinterpreted as a <i>segulah</i> for getting married: see < http://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/2014/02/03/a-segulah-to-get-married/ > (accessed 23 June 2014)
Itchy feet mean you’ll go somewhere new	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 167 (NJ)
Dip fingers in havdalah liquid and touch temples and pockets	Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 3, p. 134-5; <i>Pirkei derav eli’ezer</i> (ch. 20); Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , 296: 1: ‘to wash one’s face with the leftover wine to show how much we love the commandments’.
Immersing in <i>mikveh</i> after a bride for a <i>segulah</i>	
Drinking nine sips of cold water before Yom Kippur	< http://bungalow-babe.blogspot.co.uk/2010/09/gift-of-yom-kippur-in-bed.html > (accessed 23 June 2014) (7 sips); < http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/coffeeroom/topic/tips-to-fast-easy > (accessed 23 June 2014)
Not eating end of <i>halah</i>	BT <i>Horayot</i> 13b: eating bread before it’s baked leads to forgetting Torah; sometimes presented as a <i>segulah</i> to have male children
Praying 40 days in row at Western Wall to obtain one’s desire	Recent; Rabbi Y. S. Elyashiv (d. 2012) says it has no basis: < http://lifeinisrael.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/interesting-psak-form-rav-elyashiv-40.html > (accessed 24 June 2014)
Giving charity in memory of R Meir Ba’al Hanes to find a lost object	BT AZ 18a-b; <i>Midrash talpiyot</i> and several later sources; see article by Joshua Waxman at < http://parsha.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/rabbi-meir-baal-hanes-and-segulah-to.html > (accessed 12 Dec. 2014)

Bake key in <i>halah</i> or <i>halah</i> in key shape for first sabbath after Passover	Seems to be first mentioned in 19th cent., by Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt, <i>Ohev yisra'el</i> ; see also Sperling, <i>Ta'amei haminhagim</i> , 249-50; for article claiming it is a pagan practice, see Alfassa, 'Origins'
Saying <i>Amen</i> and/or <i>Yeheh shemeh rabah mevorakh</i> with devotion (<i>kavanah</i>)	Kanarfogel, <i>Peering</i> , 84, on the practice of Hasidei Ashkenaz for all prayers: 'reciting the liturgy slowly and accurately unlocks the esoteric meaning of the prayers'
Saying 'your verse' in <i>Elokai netsor</i> (final paragraph of Amidah prayer)	Perhaps Isaiah Horowitz, <i>Shenei luhot haberit</i> , as <i>segulah</i> on judgement day after death; <i>Sefer ben tsiyon</i> , 1690: see < http://onthemainline.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/on-source-of-merit-of-reciting-verses.html > (accessed 6 July 2014)
Hanging flour, salt & oil in <i>sukah</i>	Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8, ch. 9 for use of salt against demons
Keep piece of Passover <i>afikoman</i> in house from one year to the next	To prevent fires; mentioned in <i>Kav hayashar</i> and <i>Orhat hayim</i> , see < http://zchusavos.blogspot.co.uk/2007/03/segulas-for-pesach.html > (accessed 23 June 2014)
Itchy hands means you'll give away money	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 186 (NJ)
If you forget something don't return to house	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 413-4 - turning back is unlucky; Sperling, <i>Ta'amei haminhagim</i> , 505: 'The Divine Presence (<i>Shekhinah</i>) accompanies one on journeys, so you don't want to insult her by returning to your "lower order wife" at home'
Give charity before lighting candles	
Husband prepares sabbath candles	'So he is involved in the mitzvah'
Honey not salt on <i>halah</i> for first year of marriage	Recent?
Light candle for each member of family plus 1 to confuse the <i>satan</i> – also birthday candles	Hasidic?
Leaving undecorated patch as <i>zekher lahurban</i> (in memory of the Temple's destruction)	BT <i>BB</i> 60b; Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , 'Orah hayim' 560. Cf. Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 47 (NJ), which gives rationale of leaving something unfinished to avoid replicating God's perfection
Round <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah and Shemini Atseret for good year	
Honey not salt on <i>halah</i> between Rosh Hashanah and Shemini Atseret	Maharil, 'Hilkhoh rosh hashanah' 7; Rema on Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , 583:1, <i>Darkhei mosheh</i> , 3; <i>Levush</i> , 583:2; <i>Shulhan arukh harav</i> , 1; <i>Arukh hashulhan</i> , 2.
No <i>chrain</i> (horseradish) or nuts between Rosh Hashanah & Shemini Atseret	<i>Gematriyah</i> of <i>egoz</i> supposedly = <i>het</i> ('sin'); Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 4, pp. 42-59 (no nuts on Rosh Hashanah)
Men go to <i>mikveh</i> of Ari so they won't die without repenting	
If shut up door, chimney, window in house must leave a small hole to allow 'bad spirits' to flow in & out	
Have sweet as leave <i>mikveh</i> to have 'a sweet month'	

Not sewing Saturday evening as you will sew all week	
Not leaving shoes upside down	
Check <i>mezuzot</i> for any problem	Sperber, <i>Minhagim</i> , vol. 8 (MA); and sources there including <i>Mekhilta</i> , ‘Pis’ha’ 11, BT <i>Men.</i> 33 <i>b</i> , JT <i>Pe’ah</i> 1: 1 17 <i>d</i>
Give <i>tsedakah</i> to protect someone	See Kanarfogel, <i>Peering</i> , 84, on Hasidei Ashkenaz practice
Getting a blessing from a holy rabbi	
Touching wood	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 449-50 (NJ), very common
Opening the Torah ark on during the <i>ne’ilah</i> service of Yom Kippur for good fortune	
Reading <i>maftir</i> Yonah on Yom Kippur	
Saying <i>Atah horeita</i> verses on Simhat Torah (night & day)	
Sweep or eat breadcrumbs to get wealth	
Give double tithes (20%) of earnings to charity to increase wealth	
Not to count <i>kneidlach</i> as they are cooking or they will fall apart	
Enter and exit building by the same door	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 124 (NJ)
Return borrowed pins or you will quarrel with the lender	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 309-10 (NJ)
Bring present on first visit to new house	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 205 (NJ)
No shoes on table	Opie, <i>Dictionary</i> , 350 (NJ)
Don’t leave water uncovered overnight	BT <i>AZ</i> 30 <i>a</i> and <i>Hul.</i> 9 <i>b</i> ; Karo, <i>Shulhan arukh</i> , ‘Yoreh de’ah’ 116: 1; <i>Pithei teshuvah</i> , ‘Yoreh de’ah’ 116: 1, quoting Horowitz, <i>Shenei luhot haberit</i> , that while uncovered drinks are halakhically permitted, it is advisable to refrain from drinking them; Ganzfried, <i>Kitsur shulhan arukh</i> 33: 5

Appendix 4: Background data from the customs questionnaire

Number of respondents: 100

Table 1: Origin: Ashkenazi/Sefardi affiliation

Ashkenazim: 89
Sefardim: 5
Mixed: 4
Unknown: 2

Table 2: Age composition (percent)

18-30 - 14
31-40 - 17
41-50 - 15
51-60 - 25
61-70 - 18
71+ - 10
Unstated⁷⁶⁹ - 1

Table 3: Birthplaces of the 10% of respondents NOT born in the UK, South Africa, or Israel

Australia: 2
Belgium: 1
Canada: 2
Gibraltar: 1
Iraq: 1
Netherlands: 1
USA: 1
Zimbabwe: 1

Table 4: Birthplaces of grandparents NOT born in the UK, Eastern Europe, Germany, and Austria (percentages)

Algeria: 0.25%
Australia: 0.25%
Belgium: 0.75%
Canada: 0.5%
Dutch East Indies: 0.25%
Egypt: 0.5%

⁷⁶⁹

Assigned to 61-70 group on basis of personal knowledge.

France:	0.75%
Gibraltar:	0.75%
Greece:	0.75%
Hungary:	2.75%
Iran:	0.25%
Iraq:	1%
Israel/Palestine:	0.5%
Morocco:	1.5%
Netherlands:	1.25%
South Africa:	2%
Turkey:	1.25%
USA:	1.75%

Appendix 5: Glossary

- adon olam* - 'Lord of the world', concluding hymn of sabbath morning service
- agunah* (pl. *agunot*) - 'chained woman', i.e. a wife who is unable to obtain a divorce from her recalcitrant or absent husband
- ahavat yisra'el* - love of the Jewish people
- aliyah* (pl. *aliyot*) - 'ascent', ritual of calling up an individual to recite blessings before and after the reading of a section of the weekly Torah portion
- amidah* - central prayer of 18 blessings, recited three times daily
- am yisra'el* - the Jewish people
- ba'alot teshuvah* (masc.: *ba'alei teshuvah*) - 'masters of repentance', newly religious women/men
- bat hayil* - 'daughter of valour', group ceremony marking girls' religious majority
- beit din* (Ashkenazi pronunciation: *beis din*) - rabbinic court
- beli ayin hara* - 'no evil eye', an apotropaic expression
- bentsh* (Yid.) - to recite the Grace after Meals
- berakhah* - blessing
- berakhah aharonah* - 'final blessing', recited after eating
- berit milah* - circumcision
- birkat hamazon* - Grace after Meals
- birkhot hashahar* - 'dawn blessings', first part of the morning service
- darkhei ha'emori* - 'ways of the Amorite', magical practices
- davn* (Yid.) - pray
- dayan* (pl. *dayanim*) - judge in a *beit din*
- derashah* (pl. *derashot*) - sermon
- devar torah* - short sermon
- eruv* - a halakhically defined construction linking private and public areas that permits Jews to carry objects and children in public areas on the sabbath
- frum* (Yid.) - pious
- gemah* - acronym of *gemilut hasadim*, 'the granting of kindnesses', i.e. loan association
- hafrashat halah* - commandment to separate the first portion of dough when baking bread

haftarah - weekly reading from the Prophets

hagim - religious festivals

halah - ‘dough’, by extension the braided loaves used for sabbath

halakhah - Jewish law

hamets - ‘leaven’, and by extension food that is not kosher for Passover

hamsa - (Arabic) ‘five’, an apotropaic charm in the shape of a hand

haredi - lit. ‘trembling’ (i.e. before God), the Hebrew term for ‘ultra-Orthodox’ or ‘strictly Orthodox’, used here in preference to both

Hashem - ‘The Name’, a respectful euphemism for God

hashkafah (pl. *hashkafot*) - outlook or worldview

hashkamah - early service, scheduled before the main synagogue prayers

hasidim - ‘pious ones’, adherents of a spiritually-focused movement originating in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe

hatan - bridegroom

havdalah - ‘separation’, ceremony concluding the sabbath, employing wine, spices, and a candle

hazan, hazanut - cantor, cantorial music

heder - traditional religion school

hesed - ‘lovingkindness’, welfare activity

hespedim - eulogies

hupah - wedding canopy

kadish - mourner’s prayer

kalah - bride

kashering - process of salting meat to remove blood in order to render it kosher

kavanah (pl. *kavanot*) - ‘intention’, either devotion and concentration in prayer, or a specific intention made before reciting a blessing or prayer

ketubah - marriage contract

kever - grave

kidush - ‘sanctification’, recitation of sabbath blessing over wine; by extension, snacks served following this ritual after the sabbath morning synagogue service

kishuf - magic, witchcraft

kvater (masc.), *kvaterin* (fem.) (Yid.) - at a circumcision ceremony, the man and woman who pass the baby from the mother to the *mohel* (circumciser)

le'ilui neshamah - for the elevation of the soul

leshon hara - 'evil speech', gossip

leyen, leyening (Yid.) - reading the Torah, *haftarah*, or Megillah in the traditional chant

ma'ariv - evening service, recited daily

malakh - angel

Megillah - book of Esther, chanted on Purim

mehitsah - partition dividing men and women in synagogue

mezuzah (pl.: *mezuzot*) - parchment bearing three biblical texts, affixed in protective cases to the right doorposts of houses and rooms, to fulfil a biblical commandment

mikveh (pl. *mikvaot*) - ritual bath

minhag (pl. *minhagim*) - custom

minhag ta'ut (pl. *minhagei ta'ut*) - erroneous custom

minhah - afternoon service, recited daily

minyán (pl. *minyanim*) - prayer quorum of ten adult men

mishlo'ah manot - food gifts presented to friends on Purim

mitnagedim - 'opponents', originally used to describe early opponents of hasidism

mitsvah (pl.: *mitsvot*) - commandment

modeh ani - 'I thank you', prayer said upon awakening

musaf - additional service, recited on sabbaths and festivals

nidah - menstrual impurity

nishmat prayer - prayer recited as part of the sabbath morning service, and at other times as a *segulah*, particularly by Sefardim

omer - sequence of 49 days, each counted with a blessing, from Passover to Shavuot

parashah - weekly portion of the Torah read in synagogue

parnasah - livelihood

partnership *minyán* - new type of service in which women lead parts of the liturgy and read the Torah

pasuk (pl. *pesukim*) - biblical verse

pesukei dezimra - 'verses of song', the second section of the morning service

Purim - minor festival, during which the Megillah (book of Esther) is ceremonially read and gifts of food (*mishlo'ah manot*) are presented to friends

rebetsn - rabbi's wife

Rosh Hashanah - 'head of the year', New Year festival, lasting two days

Rosh Hodesh - 'head of the month', New Moon, a minor festival traditionally associated with women

Seder - ceremonial meal with accompanying liturgy celebrated on Passover Eve

sefer - book or scroll

segulah - charm, remedy, blessing

shabat - sabbath

sheloshim - 'thirty', mourning period during the first 30 days after a death

shema - central prayer, composed of Deut. 6: 4-9, 11: 13-21, and Numbers 15: 37-41

sheva berakhot - 'seven blessings', the seven nights of festive gatherings after a wedding, at which a sequence of seven nuptial blessings are recited over wine

sheytl (Yid.) - wig, worn by married women to cover their hair

shiur - 'measure', traditional learning session

shivah - 'seven', first week of mourning period

shul (Yid.) - synagogue

simhah - 'joy', often used to refer to a lifecycle event such as a wedding

simhat bat - 'joy of a daughter', ritual celebrating the birth of a girl

taharat hamishpahah - 'family purity', ritual purity system governing sexual relations

talit - prayer shawl, with ritual fringes (*tsitsit*) attached to all four corners

tefilah (pl. *tefilot*) - prayer

tefilin - 'phylacteries', small leather boxes containing biblical texts written on parchment, worn on weekdays on the head and arm to fulfil a biblical commandment

tehilim - psalms

tena'im - 'conditions', non-obligatory ceremony in which two sets of parents agree to their children's marriage

Tishah Be'av - Fast of the Ninth of Av, commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples

tkhines (Yid.) - women's informal prayers, composed in Yiddish from the 16th century onwards

torah shebe'al peh, torah shebikhtav - Oral Torah, Written Torah

treyf (Yid.) - non-kosher food

tsanua - modest

tsedakah - charity

tzeni'ut - modesty (Yiddish: *tsni'us*)

tsholnt (Yid.) - traditional sabbath dish designed to cook slowly from Friday afternoon to Saturday lunchtime

tsitsit - ritual fringes on four-cornered garments, worn in fulfilment of a biblical commandment

tumah - ritual impurity

yeshiva - traditional institution for talmudic learning

yeshuot - 'salvations', salvific events or miracles

yizkor - memorial service for the dead held on major festivals

yortsayt (Yid.) - anniversary of the death of a close relative

zekhut - merit

zikhrono liverakhah - 'May his memory be a blessing', phrase used of the dead

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