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## **Negotiating Female Identity in the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki: Between Tradition and Modernity**

### **Introduction: The Jewish Presence in Thessaloniki – Historical Background**

Exploring the relationship between female and Jewish identity is necessarily a multidisciplinary project, founded on the study of the religious component in the context of academic fields such as anthropology, ethnography of religion, and sociology of religion.<sup>1</sup> As the researcher delves deeper into religious communities, she or he wonders: What is the tripartite relationship between tradition, the female sex, and modernity? In Greece, several theological and sociological approaches to gender issues have been expressed, based on the Orthodox Christian tradition and the Church.<sup>2</sup> But what is the position of women in a Jewish communal world and the Greek context?

This paper discusses the modern identity of women in the Jewish community of Thessaloniki. It aims to investigate the multidimensional presence of Jewish females as agents of the cultivation and transmission of Jewish ethno-religious culture and identity. Is the female voice really heard today, or is it simply listened to? Is this voice heard in an institutional way in the communal setting?

<sup>1</sup> For various aspects of the Jewish female identity, see, Mary Neitz, “Gender and Culture: Challenges to the Sociology of Religion,” in: *Sociology of Religion* 65/4 (2004), 391-402; Harriet Hartman, Moshe Hartman, “Gender and Jewish Identity,” in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18/1 (2003), 37-60; Lori Lefkowitz, “Passing As a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance,” in: *Narrative* 10/1 (2002), 91-103.

<sup>2</sup> For theology, see, indicatively, Dimitra Koukoura, *Η Θέση της Γυναίκας στην Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία [The Position of Woman in the Orthodox Church]* (Sfakianakis: Thessaloniki 2005). For sociology, see Ioannis Petrou, “Το Ζήτημα των Γυναικών και η Εκκλησιαστική Παράδοση” [“Women Matter and the Ecclesiastical Tradition,”] in: *Scientific Annals of School of Theology A.U.TH.* 10 (2000), 221-237; Ioannis Petrou, “Φύλο, Κοινωνικοί Ρόλοι και Ορθοδοξία στην Ελληνική Πραγματικότητα” [“Gender, Social Roles and Orthodoxy in Greek Reality,”] in: *Scientific Annals of School of Theology A.U.TH.* 11 (2001), 253-263; Niki Papageorgiou, “The Position of Woman in the Orthodox Church,” in: Christina Breaban, Sophie Deicha, Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi (eds.), *Women’s Voices and Visions of the Church, Reflections of Orthodox Women* (World Council of Churches 2006), 97-104.

What is its collective expression in the religious and communal milieu, and how does it manifest itself within the community and outside of it?

The delineation, highlighting, and interpretation of the unique features of the contemporary female Jewish identity are made possible through observation of their daily lives, including their customs, worship, and communal lives. To achieve this end, this presentation will be based on empirical data from fieldwork conducted as part of an ongoing research.

At the outset of our historical overview of the Jewish presence in Thessaloniki, we should note that despite the initial existence of four ethnic groups of Jews – the Romaniotes (316-140 BCE, from Alexandria, Egypt), the Ashkenazim (1376-1470, from Central Europe), the Italiotes (1536, from Italy) and the Sephardi/Sephardim (1492-93, from the Iberian Peninsula) – the dominant identity is Sephardic, or Judaeo-Spanish.<sup>3</sup>

On 31 March 1492, following the famous Alhambra Decree, the Catholic monarchs of Spain ordered all Jews to leave the country. From the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and into the 16<sup>th</sup>, Sephardic Jews arrived in the Ottoman Empire, leading to the so-called “golden” period for Thessalonian Judaism, at the intellectual-religious, professional, and economic levels.<sup>4</sup>

In the following centuries, in the Eastern European world – as opposed to the Western European one – female identity was shaped not only within the confines of the house, but also by the local culture, by women’s matrimonial status, and by their social class.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, indigenous women in the Western European world occupied themselves primarily with activities related to their family and household environment. This includes the extroverted Sephardic newcomers who originated from a different cultural background and, unlike their coreligionists in North Africa, the Near and Middle East, were not bound by an autocratic understanding of their husband’s role.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Joseph Nehama, *Ιστορία των Ισραηλιτών της Σαλονίκης [History of the Jews of Salonika]* (University Studio Press: Thessaloniki 2000), A', 77, 131, 115, 167-168.

<sup>4</sup> Nehama, *History of the Jews of Salonika*, 115, 301.

<sup>5</sup> See Lisa Pine, “Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal,” in: *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1/2 (2008), 121-141, here 124-125.

<sup>6</sup> See Rena Molho, *Οι Εβραίοι της Θεσσαλονίκης, 1856-1919: Μια Ιδιαίτερη Κοινότητα [The Jews of Thessaloniki, 1856-1919: A Special Community]* (Themelio: Thessaloniki 2001), 152; John Megas, *Ενθόμιον από τη Ζωή της Εβραϊκής Κοινότητας - Θεσσαλονίκη 1897-1917 [Souvenir from the Life of the Jewish Community - Thessaloniki 1897-1917]* (Capon: Athens 1993), 5.

In spite of a crisis in the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>7</sup> the Jewish Community rose to prominence again from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the modernisation of Thessaloniki and the arrival of the liberal, French-based Jewish organisation, “Alliance Israélite Universelle” [A.I.U.] in the years 1873-1910).<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that with the assistance of the A.I.U., which held the woman to be “Equal to the man, (as) his partner in life”,<sup>9</sup> and in cooperation with female figures from the bourgeoisie and the community institutions, the position of the Jewish woman was redefined. Women’s activities were expanded into the public sphere, particularly in education and social welfare, and the first women’s faculties, professional training centres, and girls’ schools were established. In some of these, women held administrative positions. Some examples include the remarkable work done by women at a private Jewish school for girls (1867), a vocational school for housekeeping (*Atelier de jeunes filles*), the Aboav orphanage for girls (1925), the “300 Ladies” association, and the Allians schools. Also of importance was the establishment of the first organised philanthropic associations,<sup>10</sup> focusing on training young girls.<sup>11</sup> In 1935, the first all-female community organisation, Vizo, was established, the social and charitable activity of which continues today.<sup>12</sup>

During these crucial years, which witnessed the annexation of the city to the Greek state (1912-1922), Jewish identity was redefined along the twin axes of national and religious identity – Greek and Jewish – as the result of the official recognition of the Jewish Community by the Greek state (1920).<sup>13</sup> The Jewish

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<sup>7</sup> See Albert Nar, *Κείμενα επί Ακτής Θαλάσσης [Texts on Sea Coast]* (University Studio Press/Ekfrasi: Thessaloniki 1997), 87; Albert Nar, “Κοινωνική Οργάνωση και Δραστηριότητες της Εβραϊκής Κοινότητας Θεσσαλονίκης” [“Community Organization and Activity of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki,”] in: Ioannis Chasiotis (ed.), *Θεσσαλονίκη, Ιστορία και Πολιτισμός [Thessaloniki, History and Culture]* (Paratiritis: Thessaloniki 1997), Α’, 266-295, here 278-279. See further, Kostas Moskof, *Θεσσαλονίκη: 1700-1912, Τομή της μεταπρατικής Πόλης [Thessaloniki: 1700-1912, Section of a Resale City]* (Stohastis: Athens 1978), 139.

<sup>8</sup> R. Molho, *The Jews of Thessaloniki*, 82, 150-151, 186, 190, 214-215, 217, 219.

<sup>9</sup> R. Molho, *The Jews of Thessaloniki*, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Philanthropic organisations such as Bienfaisance (1895), Tiféreth, and Association des Anciennes Élèves de l’ Alliance (1909); See R. Molho, *The Jews of Thessaloniki*, 177; Michael Molho, *In Memoriam* (Jewish Community of Thessaloniki: Thessaloniki 1976), 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Molho, *The Jews of Thessaloniki*, 108-109, 146-154, 175-178.

<sup>12</sup> Unpublished interviews with Jewish women, members of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, May-July 2015.

<sup>13</sup> See Efi Amilitou, Dimitra Touladou (eds.), *Εβραίοι και Χριστιανοί στη Νεότερη Ελλάδα [Jews and Christians in Modern Greece]*, Bernard Pierron, George Saratsiotis (trans.) (Polis: Athens 2004), 80, 92, 94, 101, 137, 139, 145-146, 148, 150-153.

population had been the majority in the multiethnic society of Thessaloniki until the arrival of the refugees from Asia Minor (1922-23). In 1944 – following the outbreak of World War II, the invasion of German troops (1941-44), and the adoption of the Nuremberg race laws by the Nazi regime (2 August 1943) – within just six months, the vast majority of the Jewish population (around 96%, or fifty six thousand) was expelled and eventually disappeared.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, the centre of Greek Jewry shifted to the capital of Athens, and the Jewish presence in Thessaloniki was reduced to a mere one thousand people.<sup>15</sup>

After the war, within the Jewish community but also in the broader local community of Thessaloniki, Jewish women survivors tried to rebound amidst complete social disorganisation and poverty. On the one hand, those female Greek Jewish refugees who survived the concentration camps, “thought about and longed for one thing only – returning home[...] But what is home?” they wondered.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the Greek Jewish women who were rescued were suspended in a shattered postwar community, attempting to reconstruct it either through volunteer work with youth or by getting married and starting families. Admittedly, the majority of the Jewish population was dominated by a strong shift towards the ideal of marriage as the only way toward personal stability and reintegration into society. Jewish women would say, characteristically,

The two of us were the first brides who wore white wedding dresses. The ones before us were married even in robes[...] Until then, marriages were done two or three at a time[...] They were getting married to start a new life with a partner[...] and in order to endure their loneliness and unbearable grief.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that the postwar Jewish female identity, under pressure from historical and social developments, has been shaped or negotiated not in terms of communal identity, but in terms of personal survival.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Molho, *In Memoriam*, 351.

<sup>15</sup> They were later renamed Displaced Persons (DPs). For a reconstruction of the identity of women DPs, see Margarete Feinstein, “Jewish Women Survivors in the Displaced Persons Camps of Occupied Germany: Transmitters of the Past, Caretakers of the Present, and Builders of the Future,” in: *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 24/4 (2006), 67-89.

<sup>16</sup> Rika Benveniste, *Those Who Survived* (Polis: Athens 2014), 349 [in Greek: *Αυτοί που επέζησαν*].

<sup>17</sup> Nina Benroubi, *Μια Ζωή Γλυκιά και Πικρή [A life Sweet and Bitter]* (Modern Horizons: Athens 2004), 205-206 (my translation from Greek). See also Erika Kounio Amarilio, Frangiski Ampatzopoulou (eds.), *Πενήντα Χρόνια Μετά [Fifty Years Later]* (Paratiritis: Thessaloniki 1995), 158.

## **The Role of Jewish Women in the Contemporary Jewish Community in Thessaloniki: On the Margins or Not?<sup>18</sup>**

### *The Religious Sphere – Synagogue*

In the contemporary Jewish community in Thessaloniki, the concept of the religious sphere is identified with the word “synagogue”. The religious structure is understood as a part of communal life, without completely coinciding with it. The religious element, in other words, is real, but clearly secondary, inasmuch as the synagogue, as the place of worship, does not represent for its members the whole of communal existence, but rather only a part of it: while they would never eschew it, they also do not consider it the foremost element of their collective unity.<sup>19</sup>

In today’s Jewish community in Thessaloniki, Jewish women, even though they enjoy, according to rabbinical teachings, equality with men in worship and religious life, are nevertheless not able to exercise any liturgical or priestly office. Women – who, unlike men, are free from the vast majority of religious commandments (*Mitzvot*) – are limited to participation and supplication of the divine.<sup>20</sup> Even though women’s religiosity is visibly weakened,<sup>21</sup> they make their presence clearly felt with their mass arrival on Friday evening, that is to say, at the lighting of the candles and the Saturday morning service, as well as on the major Jewish holidays. Unlike many other religious groups,<sup>22</sup> men often outnumber women, perhaps due to the requirement that at least ten adult men (*Minian*), not women, participate in the service. For their part, active female members describe the religious part of their lives in remarks regarding the individual level, such as “I feel proud to be born a Jew[...] It makes me stronger,” and “I will defend my religious identity.” At the collective level

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<sup>18</sup> Title based on the book by Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1997).

<sup>19</sup> See Maria Sidiropoulou, *Θρησκεία και Ταυτότητα στην Εβραϊκή Κοινότητα Θεσσαλονίκης [Religion and Identity in the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki]* (Master’s Thesis) (Faculty of Theology – School of Theology A.U.TH.: Thessaloniki 2015), 86-89.

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished interview with the Thessaloniki Jewish Community Rabbi, 17 October 2013.

<sup>21</sup> The trends of religiosity are not universal. While women exhibit high levels of inclusivity in the synagogue in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, in non-Ultra-Orthodox ones the levels are lower. For further, see, Paul Sullins, “Gender and Religiousness: Deconstructing Universality, Constructing Complexity”, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 112/3 (2006), 838-880, here 849-851.

<sup>22</sup> For inquiries regarding the differences of gender and religious practice see Grace Davie, *Κοινωνιολογία της Θρησκείας [Sociology of Religion]*, Euaggelia Liliou, Niki Papageorgiou (trans.) (Critiki: Athens 2010), 360-367.

however, they note that “the role of religion has waned[...] We remember it only in times of need.”<sup>23</sup>

In the synagogue, the rabbi has the highest institutional post, the religious leader, surrounded by male-dominated hierarchical positions such as that of the cantor (*Hazan*). The female roles are informal, silent, and non-institutional, but nevertheless important, since they contribute significantly and in various ways to the transmission of Jewish tradition. Jewish women, even if they are secular, socially networked, and integrated into local society, have never renounced their traditional role; in the synagogue, they are voluntarily entrusted with strengthening the Jewish element of the remaining members’ identity. They offer valuable assistance with the liturgical and practical needs at the daily sacred services and immediately after their conclusion at the blessing (*Kiddush*), as well as in sacred ceremonies (marriage, circumcision, *bar-* and *bat-mitzvah*, memorials), always keeping the dietary regulations (*Kosher*).<sup>24</sup>

In sum, within the realm of the synagogue, one can easily observe the informal yet traditional female presence and active engagement as a unifying element and cultural conveyor of their religious, Judaic heritage.

### *The Communal Sphere: Collective Actions by Women*

Undoubtedly, in the field of contemporary social reality and modern society, the role of the female sex is often understood as fixed and given. On a practical level, however, the enjoyment of this status quo is due to the endless struggles of women’s movements, which began in the United States and Europe. Human rights for women, their entrance into the labor force, and the securing of their civil rights led to the improvement of women’s position, inasmuch as, from the inertia of the pre-modern period, women have come to assume a tangible role and now share in public benefits. These reforms have also impacted the religious sphere, where women have claimed equal participation in the administrative, institutional positions of their respective bodies.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1960’s in the United States, just after the beginning of the second feminist movement, Jewish women seeking equality became the institutional

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<sup>23</sup> Unpublished interviews with Jewish women, members of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, May-July 2015 (Here and henceforth, my translation from Greek).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See Ioannis Petrou, *Κοινωνιολογία [Sociology]* (Vaniias: Thessaloniki 2007), 295-300.

transformers of communal and public Judaism.<sup>26</sup> In other words, they began to actively occupy themselves with communal Judaic life, concentrating on aspects of their religious, ceremonial, ritual, and educational life, inside and outside of both their synagogue and their community, in the social and public sphere. Decades later, this activist wave of multi-faceted and impressive Jewish communal activity reached Europe through Westernised Jewish women, in the form of collective, charitable, and cultural initiatives.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, in Thessaloniki, the individualistic aspect of Jewish, religious faith, in connection with the prevailing anthropocentric, communal forms of activity, shifted the centre of attention from the religious arena to the communal and cultural one. In a communal context of coexistence, what then is the role of the Jewish women of Thessaloniki? Is it institutional or non-institutional? Are they the clear protagonists of communal life, or its unsung heroines? Are there organised groups that represent only women's perspective? If so, what are the areas of activity of the women in Jewish communal life? What is their goal, and what impact do they have?

Nowadays, the aim of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki is, primarily, to serve the needs of its members at the communal, extra-communal, and social levels of life, and secondarily, to maintain and reshape their ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity. Communal operations are founded within a secular rather than a religious system and run mainly by institutional community personnel, but also by decision making bodies such as committees and councils, in which women also participate in institutional capacities. The community is seen as a multivalent centre with a multifaceted character, the most important task of which is to strengthen the sense of belonging, solidarity, and cohesion of its members. Few are the members who completely identify with the community; others regard it as part of their lives; and nearly everyone perceives it as a reference point in difficult times.<sup>28</sup>

The contemporary Jewish females of Thessaloniki may not have as radical a presence as other Jewish women of the West. In the United States, Europe, and to a lesser extent Israel, various trends among Jewish women, such as

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<sup>26</sup> For an autobiography of a Jewish woman in the United States after 1960, see Rebecca Walker, *Black, White and Jewish* (Riverhead Books: New York 2002).

<sup>27</sup> See Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Women's Transformations of Public Judaism: Religiosity, Egalitarianism, and the Symbolic Power of Changing Gender Roles", in: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 17 (2001), 131-155.

<sup>28</sup> Sidiropoulou, *Religion and Identity*, 78-85.

“secular” (*Hiloni*), “traditionalist” (*Masorti*), “religious” (*Dati*), and even “ultra-orthodox” (*Haredi*) are taking shape in both conservative and reform environments. At the same time, one finds fundamentalist voices within their communities, focusing on biblical reforms of the sacred law or on feminist, charitable, and religious groups and movements (some including women rabbis and others not).<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, the Jewish women of Thessaloniki are embedded in value-systems shaped by earlier structures. Thus, despite living in modern society, they are characterised by a unique community dynamic. These Jewish women, either through their religious space – namely, the synagogue – as mentioned above, or through communal action,<sup>30</sup> are convinced of the unbroken cultural unity of their Sephardic tradition and thus try “To be the editors[...] of Judaism to their children, and to make memories for them.”<sup>31</sup>

Women’s contribution to the communal arena takes place both formally and informally. Their formal contribution is manifested in staffing communal positions, such as community council and communal organisations. A the same time, however, the core of women’s interest lies in many informal and

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<sup>29</sup> For the United States, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “Gender Identity in Halakhic Discourse,” in: *Jewish Women’s Archive* (2009). (<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gender-identity-in-halakhic-discourse>, 14 October 2015); Lauren Markoe, “Women Rabbis are Forging a Path Outside Denominational Judaism,” in: *Religion News Service* (2015). (<http://www.religionnews.com/2015/04/08/women-rabbis-forging-path-outside-denominational-judaism>, 14 October 2015). For Europe, see Paula Hyman, “Gender and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identities,” in: *Jewish Social Studies* 8/2-3 (2002), 153-161; Chia Longman, “‘Not Us, but You Have Changed!’ Discourses on Difference and Belonging among Haredi Women,” in: *Social Compass* 54/1 (2007), 77-95. For Israel, see Yaacov Yadgar, “Gender, Religion, and Feminism: The Case of Jewish Israeli Traditionalists,” in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45/3 (2006), 353-370; Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society – Sources, Trends and Processes* (The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies: Jerusalem 1991). For Jewish Arab Feminist activist organisations, see Ruth Halperin Kaddari, Yaacov Yadgar, “Between Universal Feminism and Particular Nationalism: Politics, Religion and Gender (in) equality in Israel,” in: *Third World Quarterly* 31/6 (2010), 905-920, here 913-915, 917. For a review of Jewish biblical issues, see Blu Greenberg, “Female Sexuality and Bodily Functions in the Jewish Tradition,” in: Jeanne Becher (ed.), *Women, Religion and Sexuality* (WCC Publications: Geneva 1990), 1-44.

<sup>30</sup> For such surveys, see Harriet Hartman, Moshe Hartman, “Jewish Identity and the Secular Achievements of American Jewish Men and Women,” in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50/1 (2011), 133-153.

<sup>31</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, Daniel Parmer, *The Gender Imbalance in American Jewish Life* (Brandeis University – Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies – Hadassah Brandeis Institute: Massachusetts 2008), 75.



non-institutional levels of Jewish life, such as the area of religion, dietary habits (*Kosher*), education, building relationships with Jewish youth around Greece, and finally, offering charity and social work. More specifically, the voluntary female contribution takes place both inside and outside the community, in frames such as a youth camp run by female members of the Jewish Youth of Greece [J.Y.G.]; a Jewish school providing catechism and information on the Jewish religion; communal charitable organisations and initiatives; the “Greece Israel” association; a Jewish choir; events for showcasing Sephardic music and cuisine; and, finally, commemorations of the Jewish Genocide.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, two entirely female charitable associations, the longstanding Vizo and the newer Ziv, are tasked with the preservation and conservation of Jewish cultural heritage. Women, approximately over seventy years of age, participate in Vizo, while women over twenty eight are involved in Ziv. The institutional structure of the two organisations is composed of one president, one treasurer, one secretary, and of course Jewish females as members. Their missions are philanthropic, such as supporting the poor or “those who have substantial needs” inside and outside the community (as in greater Thessaloniki), as well as Israel. It is therefore clear that, while these women’s organisations are Jewish, their sphere of activity is multidimensional, since it includes the whole social fabric of the city.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these women’s obvious and varied activities, they voice the belief that “we could have more members, and we could do more both inside and outside the community.” The majority of young women involved participate in the events organised by J.Y.G., while the majority of older women, roughly between forty and seventy five, is entrusted with the preservation of customs, tradition, and Jewish cultural heritage.<sup>34</sup>

It may thus be concluded that women, with their communal activities, are the ethno-cultural forwarders and carriers of Jewish, Sephardic heritage, since they are the ones disseminating and transmitting the torch of their tradition to younger and future generations.

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<sup>32</sup> Unpublished interviews with Jewish women, members of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, May-July 2015.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Mapping a Female Jewish Identity: Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination**

It is commonplace that in the contemporary realm of late modernity, notable and paradoxical circumstances can suddenly change the identities of communal subjects involved. This is in combination with general socio-politico-economic reforms. In other words, in urban living, the demands of the times may mutate and replace former traditional components of the identity construction with individualistic actions of a collective nature and a “local culture.”<sup>35</sup>

This section examines the contemporary identity of Jewish women, with the Jewish community of Thessaloniki as the case in point. Under what conditions do Jewish women operate today, in both the communal and broader social realm? And how is their identity defined?

To answer this, one must first determine the components of modern, Jewish female identity. One is her direct and indirect roots: the elements of religion and ethnicity, namely Jewish religious identity, on the one hand, and the more recent Judaeo-Spanish or Sephardic roots from the Iberian Peninsula on the other hand. At the same time, a decisive role in female self-definition is played by tradition, manners, and customs, as regarding Jewish holidays for instance, by the Sephardi language (Judezmo or Ladino), and by the recent traumatic event of the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup>

A second component is these women’s self-definition. The current research has made clear that the Jewish women of Thessaloniki see themselves today as having a dual identity, determined by their ethno-religious and national roots. The majority express their Greek citizenship and their Judaic faith by referring to themselves as “Greek Jews,” or, to a lesser extent, as “Jewish Greek,” or “Greek, non-religious Jews.” The terms of their Greekness and Jewishness are therefore fully incorporated and reflected within their female self-understanding. The only instances in which individuals declare first their religious affiliation – with an obvious intent to defend it – and only second their national affiliation are when individuals of other faiths from outside the community ask about their religious identity. This happens, for instance, when others – usually Greek Orthodox Christians – assume that these Jewish women

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<sup>35</sup> See Christos Tsironis, *Globalization and Local Communities* (Vania: Thessaloniki 2007), 74-76 .

<sup>36</sup> Unpublished interviews with Jewish women, members of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, May-July 2015.

are themselves also Orthodox Christians, or when they ask why they have non-Christian names.<sup>37</sup>

Generally speaking, Jewish women appear integrated into the Greek social network and environment. All seem to have developed friendly interpersonal relationships with members of other faiths, people from outside the community as well as secular co-citizens, while a considerable portion have contracted mixed marriages, which may be seen as an indication of their smooth integration into Thessalonian society. The vast majority of Jewish women interviewed believe that their Greek identity is inextricably tied to their religious one. In several cases, the only difficulty lies in the identification of Greekness with Orthodox Christianity, particularly among the younger generations, where one observes an obvious and strong connection with the modern state of Israel.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a strong sense of belonging to the local community of Thessaloniki. This may be explained by the fact that the women's dynamic activities often make them ambassadors of good will. They communicate in various ways with those outside their community in terms of reconciliation and a genuine desire for fellowship. In fact, this good will is often given institutional approval, with the recognition of their local, municipal, and private contributions to society.<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that modern women researchers studying Ultra-Orthodox, Jewish female issues insist on discussing matters of women's identities outside the borders of their communal existence, in order to open them up and aid in the success of their communal activities as agents of their tradition.<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, the Jewish female identity is able to maintain an active dialogue with the present. Preserving national (Greek) characteristics, ethno-local, and religious (Judaic) traits, women shape their identity both inside and outside the communal grid through cultural activities that promote their female Sephardic cultural basis, as well as through charitable acts. The purpose of this philanthropy, as they themselves – as Greek Jews – describe it, is “the common good (which springs) from our inner world to the outer world.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See Chia Longman, Gila Schnitzer, “At Home in the Diaspora: Judaism, Gender and Globalization,” in: Erik Eynikel, Aggeliki Ziaka (eds.), *Religion and Conflict* (Harpreet Publishing: London 2011), 307-318, here 316.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Of course, the transmission of their Jewish cultural tradition to younger generations is particularly important to these women. Today, the Greek Sephardim Jewish women act as the cultural transmitters, the last guardians, and the custodians of their Sephardic-Jewish ethno-religious heritage in the Greek reality of Thessaloniki. As they themselves have noted, “it is the favorite part of my life, which I want to pass on to my children, and that is why we are all trying to preserve that which could be lost.”<sup>42</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This overview of Jewish women’s presence and identity has allowed us to draw the following conclusions within two spatio-temporal and socio-political frameworks: the earlier, traditional world of pre-modern society and communal Jewish female identity on the one hand, and the later, current world, which is defined by the gradual, highly innovative emergence of the Jewish woman and her transition into the public sphere.

In the modern era, always faced with the danger of community members completely assimilating in the broader culture, the primary goal of Jewish women’s active and multifaceted presence and their communal and social contributions, is the transmission of their Jewish cultural tradition to the younger generations. With the exception of the two wholly-female institutions mentioned above, female identity and activity – unlike that of men – largely operates in an informal communal way; it is not institutionally recognised by its religious or communal leaders, and behaves in a way that vacillates between tradition and modernity.

Thessaloniki, due to its geopolitical position, has functioned as a crossroad of many people and many religions. In particular, the Jewish presence reached its apogee during the Ottoman period (15th-20th Century). Over the past hundred years, after the official annexation of Thessaloniki to the Greek state, the identity of the Jews changed. Despite the numerical weakness of the old ethno-religious Jewish community during its annihilation in the years 1941-44, today, once again, Jews claim a place in the city life. This paper will focus on the contemporary Jewish female presence in Thessaloniki. On the one hand, Jewish women have their own role contributing in various ways to the maintenance, transmission, and reproduction of their particular ethnoreligious identity. On the other hand, they negotiate their active role in the modern Greek society. In other words, the author investigates the ways

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

in which Jewish women negotiate between tradition and modernity, between their own traditional and modern identity.

Thessaloniki war historisch betrachtet aufgrund seiner geopolitischen Lage immer Treffpunkt von Menschen und Religionen. Dabei erreichte die jüdische Präsenz ihren Höhepunkt während der osmanischen Zeit vom 15. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert. Im Laufe des letzten Jahrhunderts und nach der offiziellen Aufnahme von Thessaloniki in den griechischen Staat, änderte sich die Identität der Juden. Die alte ethno-religiöse jüdische Gemeinde ist heute noch lebendig. Dies trotz ihrer zahlenmäßigen Reduzierung durch ihre Vernichtung in der Zeit von 1941-44. Heute sind Menschen jüdischen Glaubens stark im Stadtleben wahrnehmbar. Der vorliegende Artikel widmet sich den Frauen unter ihnen. Jüdinnen widmen sich einerseits der Erhaltung, der Übertragung und die Ausgestaltung ihrer besonderen ethnisch-religiösen Identität, und andererseits leben sie ihre aktive Rolle in der zeitgenössischen griechischen Gesellschaft. Die Autorin untersucht die Art und Weise, in welcher die jüdischen Frauen in Thessaloniki zwischen Tradition und Moderne ihre Identität verhandeln und leben.

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