

Transformation:

A Modern Woman's Definition of Selfhood Through Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הגדרת אישה מודרנית של עצמיות דרך יהדות חרדית

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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Aims and General Description

I would like to explore the phenomena of *ba'alot teshuva* (female returnees to Judaism) who became religious between the ages of 18-22 years, which correspond with the years of undergraduate studies in America, and what is known in psychology as the age of identity formation. I have chosen this age group since they are essentially rejecting an adult lifestyle they have not yet begun to experience, and this represents a conscious and idealistic choice motivated by their goals and dreams for the future, rather than something that may have been based in failure and dashed expectations (failure to get the job they wanted, failure to find satisfaction in their chosen career, failure to get married, the experience of getting divorced, etc.)

I would like to explore what causes someone to essentially reject an adult lifestyle they have not yet begun to experience based on the following questions:

What are they looking to achieve? Why do they make a radical choice that represents a re-creation and re-definition of self, even to the point that it often requires adopting a new name? Most importantly, what internal conflicts and challenges do they face in adopting their new life-style? Do they envision themselves as sacrificing an existing portion of themselves in order to embrace something new, and if so, how do they define that sacrifice, and how do they reconcile their gain against their loss?

Conceptual Background

What most interests me, and what truly motivates my research, is the crisis of meaning that results when an unanticipated life challenge or unrecognized and deeply internalized belief or belief system – often in relation to marriage or family relationships – crashes against the newly adopted

belief system of newly chosen lifestyle. To the extent that we consciously re-create ourselves, we also bring unrecognized parts of ourselves with us that often become activated or triggered in times of crisis or high anxiety. Assuming such crises, how did these women respond in a psychologically healthy manner (if indeed they did) and maintain their commitment to a coherent sense of self? Did these challenges strengthen or weaken their commitment to their chosen life-style?

I intend to limit my research population to a group who chose to move to Israel as well as reject their upbringing, both for the ease of conducting face-to-face interviews, and because it represents a further radicalization of choice. As a psychologist, I will also limit my research population to a group that was essentially psychologically healthy at the time they made their decision, and remain psychologically healthy today. In other words, I will be examining women who were equipped for, and who have successfully withstood, the psychological pressures and demands of their decision and chosen lifestyle.

Previous research exists on this topic, conducted primarily by sociologists and scholars of gender studies who were motivated to understand what drove these women to reject the feminist movement. The most famous of these studies are:

- Davidman, L. R. (1986). *"Strength of Tradition in a Chaotic World": Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Ann Arbor, UMI.
- Kaufman, D. R. (1991). *Rachel's daughters: Newly orthodox Jewish women*. Rutgers University Press.

By contrast I will be studying women who have been religious for at least twenty years, long enough to have travelled from the age of identity formation to the age of maturity. I will be

comparing what they hoped to achieve and what they actually achieved. I will be asking the following questions:

- What has their chosen lifestyle actually given them in terms of what they hoped to achieve?
- How has reality compared to fantasy?
- How does the reality of adulthood compare to their youthful idealism?
- What have they gained?
- What have they lost?
- What have they given up that they now regret losing?
- How has the experience of building and raising a family in their new community altered and challenged their previous expectations?
- How has this affected their relationships with their own children?
- How has it affected their understanding of their children's relationships to their own grandparents?

I suspect, although this is yet to be confirmed through research, that frequently the losses will entail a certain sense of financial security and material success on a practical level, as well as a sense of truly understanding and belonging to cultural norms and expectations of their chosen community on a psychological level.

In essence, I am exploring the choices these women have made from the perspective of time and distance. To date, no follow-up research has been conducted in this area. This is what will distinguish my research. The majority of the previous research is thirty years old, and was conducted at a time when the phenomena of the ba'alat teshuva movement (women choosing to

adopt an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle) was new and unexpected. It has now a significant and sizeable trend, and is not an unexpected lifestyle choice for a Jewish woman. It is no longer off the map.

However, the women who adopted this lifestyle twenty years ago were essentially pioneers who did not have a mature role model that could testify to them that they had also adopted this life-style as an adult returnee to Judaism, and look what I have accomplished, look what my choice has brought me, look what I have achieved through my choice.

My anticipated readership is multi-dimensional. I believe the research will be of interest to the original researchers who studied the movement, and anyone interested in gender studies and the long-term consequences of the feminist movement. I also believe that the research will be of interest to Jewish women of all levels of religiosity, and especially to those women who have adopted the Orthodox life-style and never had the opportunity to examine and understand their choice from a more academic and objective perspective.

I believe the research will also be of interest to those who already lead an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle and cannot understand what motivated and allowed these women to make such a radical redefinition of self, even if the chosen definition supported and validated their own lifestyle.

Finally I believe the research will be of particular interest to the educators who led the movement and will now examine the long-term consequences of their behaviors and decisions.

I have already conducted unofficial and preliminary interviews which validated and supported these conclusions, and I also consulted with a well-known publicist for his opinion on whether the finished thesis/book would meet a niche in the book market and be publishable. He felt that my qualifications as a psychologist would lend a level of authority to the work, and allow it to be desirable to a broader readership. This is important to me, since I have already published

three books within the ultra-Orthodox publishing world, and hope to have this thesis form the basis of my forth published work, but one that will not be published by an Orthodox Jewish press, and limited to an Orthodox Jewish readership.

My perspective as a narrator is unique in that I have a Master's degree in clinic sociology with an emphasis on the lifecycle and family studies, advanced training in marital and family therapy, where I currently work in private practice, and also meet my own research criteria.

The main challenge I foresee in writing my thesis will be to maintain a popular and readable tone, rather than adopting a clinical and academic tone that will be off-putting and inaccessible to my desired readership. I hope to overcome this challenge through the employment of distinct stylistic devices of creative non-fiction such as incorporating well-defined scenes, first person narrative accounts, dialogues, and sensory grounding, and also through the careful interweaving of my own unique voice as a narrator. Academic research tends to downplay and diminish the voice of the narrators' personal perspective, and through emphasizing my own voice in the form of memoir and contrasting my own experiences to those of my interview subjects, I hope to overcome this challenge.

In addition to providing historical background from the previous research conducted in this area, I will also conduct interviews with educators who have been active in the movement during the twenty year period these women have maintained their religious life-style to gain an additional and external perspective on their choices. I have already been in touch with certain educators who have agreed to participate.

Shape of Project

I intend to arrange my thesis by comparing the experiences of these newly religious women according to a chronological time line – their experiences, accomplishments, and challenges after being religious for five years, for ten years, for fifteen years, for twenty years. I believe that this choice will serve to organize my research as well as to allow room for creative liberty and the employment of stylistic devices to recreate the scenes and key moments in these women's lives. I have selected this organizational structure because the organization of the thesis will be a significant factor in terms of readability of the finished work, and will make the book a work of creative non-fiction as opposed to a more academic work.

I anticipate and remain open to new lines of inquiry and avenues of exploration as my research progresses. I am not out to prove a pre-existing hypothesis, but rather to explore a phenomena from the perspective of time.

Bibliography and Literature Review

In the course of writing this thesis, I have begun and will continue to examine several different types of literature.

Most importantly, there are those books that will examine that research that already exists on this phenomena. These books primarily concern themselves with the decision to adopt an ultra-Orthodox life-style and do not examine the long-term outcomes of that decision. These include:

- Davidman, L. R. (1986). *"Strength of Tradition in a Chaotic World": Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Ann Harbor: UMI.
- Kaufman, D. R. (1991). *Rachel's daughters: Newly orthodox Jewish women*. Rutgers University Press.

There are a number of books that will be consulted to provide a historical context to the ba'al teshuva movement. These include:

- Aviad, J. (1983). *Return to Judaism: Religious Renewal in Israel*. University of Chicago Press.
- Danzger, M. H. (1989). *Returning to tradition: The contemporary revival of Orthodox Judaism*. Yale University Press.

There are also books that will be consulted to provide the larger sociological context of women who reject the aspects of the feminist movement in favor of an alternative or more traditional lifestyle in order to understand and contrast the motivations of women who modify their life-style without renouncing the general cultural in which they were raised. These include:

- Slaughter, A. (2012.). *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>
- Spar, D. L. (2013). *Wonder women: Sex, power, and the quest for perfection*. Macmillan.

Several fictional accounts that feature a ba'alat teshuva as a main character will be analyzed to understand how the ba'alat teshuva is portrayed as both an outsider and an insider within the community. These include:

- King, R. (2004). *Seven Blessings: A Novel*. Macmillan.
- Miller, R. (2012). *My Before and After Life*. St. Martin's Press.
- Miller, R. (2014). *Welcome to Heavenly Heights: A Novel*. St. Martin's Press.
- Mirvis, T. (2000). *The Ladies Auxiliary*. Random House LLC.
- Mirvis, T. (2007). *The Outside World*. Vintage.

Lastly, there are several literary models of creative non-fiction that will be explored as the basis for the stylistic presentation and organization of my thesis. These include:

- Gutkind, L. (2005). *In fact: The best of creative nonfiction* (No. 24-25). WW Norton & Company.
- Keret, E. (2010). Ultra-Orthodox Sister. In E. Albert (Ed.), *Freud's Blind Spot: 23 Original Essays on Cherished, Estranged, Lost, Hurtful, Hopeful, Complicated Siblings*. Simon and Schuster.
- Patchett, A. (2013). *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. Harper.

This bibliography will be supplemented by journal articles from both academic and popular journals as needed.