

Literary Portrayals of Jewish American Women in Orthodox Society at
the Turn of the Millennium

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c. Aims and General Description

The aim of this dissertation is to explore one aspect of what Thane Rosenbaum (1997) called "The Jewish Literary Revival," the new interest shown by contemporary Jewish American writers in their ethnic, religious and cultural past. Specifically, I will explore fiction and memoir written between 1980 and the present that is by or about Orthodox Jewish women and that engages the conflict between feminism and Orthodoxy.

There has been no comprehensive investigation of these contemporary Jewish women writers' narratives so far. In my dissertation, I wish to focus on these writers' portrayals of women in the Jewish Orthodox community. These writers write out of a context already deeply affected by Jewish feminism. I find it particularly significant to look into and discuss the tensions between Orthodoxy and feminism as portrayed by this "new wave" of Jewish American women's writing published at the turn of the twenty-first century.

My dissertation's contribution will be to focus on authors who present female protagonists struggling with the conflicts between tradition and modernity, with the balance between religious and secular values, with the place they must, or want to take in religion, with the expectations and restrictions of patriarchal, male-centered communities and with their desire to be part of a modern Western world.

Generally speaking, the Orthodox world perceives religious faith and feminist convictions as antithetical. Secular feminists hold the same opinion. The contribution of this dissertation will stem from investigating how these women (authors and characters) negotiate the challenges and opportunities provided by the Jewish Orthodox environment in their quest for identity, for power and voice, for self-realization and their spiritual passion for learning and knowledge, in realms hitherto solely the province of men.

I hope to show that at the heart of each novel or memoir lies a tension, a potential for change that may go in different directions--as the responses to the conflict between feminism and Orthodoxy may range from rejection of Orthodoxy to a variety of attempts to synthesize tradition and modernity. I will furthermore, attempt to show

how, through what literary models, devices, and tropes - the writers in question imagine these women's human relationships, lives and identities.

Among the works I have chosen to discuss: *The Romance Reader* (1995) by Pearl Abraham, *Houses of Study* (2009) by Ilana Blumberg, *Hush* (2012) by Judy Brown, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots* (2012) by Deborah Feldman, *The Mind Body Problem* (1983) and *Mazel* (1995) by Rebecca Goldstein Newberger, *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) by Allegra Goodman, *The Ladies Auxiliary* (1999) by Tova Mirvis, *Sotah* (1992), *The Sacrifice of Tamar* (1995), *Chains around Grass* (2001), *Jephthe's Daughter* (2010), by Naomi Ragen, *Lovingkindness* (1997) by Anne Roiphe, *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (2015) by Leah Vincent. The remaining works are listed in the *Primary Biography* chapter.

d. Scholarly Background

(i) Foreword

In order to justify my project, I will need to define its place in the following areas of research: Orthodoxy in the USA at the turn of the millennium and Jewish American feminism in the context of traditional Judaism. Since Orthodoxy plays a dominant role in these authors writing, it is necessary to provide some background information on traditional Judaism which provides a particular approach to tradition, and a particular role for women. Moreover, as Horowitz (2009) notes, contemporary Jewish American writers write out of a context already deeply affected by Jewish feminism, therefore it is pertinent to discuss Jewish feminism in the US at the turn of the millennium.

ii) Orthodoxy in the USA at the Turn of the Millennium

Orthodox Judaism is split in many groups, movements and sects but can be generally divided into two distinct groups: Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox who can be Hasidic or Yeshivish. All other sects fall somewhere in between.

The term Ultra-Orthodoxy is applied "to the most religiously conservative and stringent branches of Judaism in North America. In contrast to the relatively larger Reform and Conservative denominations, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism advocates strict adherence to its understanding of religious tradition." (Krakowski, 2012).

The ultra-Orthodox view general culture as a threat to their way of life, and aspire to live as secluded as possible from general society. They may (in the U.S) engage in

secular professions and work in secular environments, but they avoid as much of secular culture as possible. Education in ultra-Orthodox schools is mostly religious. Although there is no Halachic rule against attending college, the practice is highly discouraged by some in the ultra-Orthodox world. Nearly all ultra-Orthodox Jews insist on avoiding mass media such as films, television, and even secular newspapers. Men are encouraged to grow up to be Torah Scholars and Rabbis, while women are envisioned to grow up good housewives. Segregation between men and women, boys and girls is very strong in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Traditional Judaism in accordance with traditional Jewish law (halakha) maintains strict gender role differentiation and more strict observance of halakha regarding men's and women's roles in worship, greatly limiting the opportunities for women to participate in worship (Biale 1984; Greenberg, 1983). Women are praised for maintaining the home, caring for the family, food-preparation, and perhaps business acumen (Heller, Rebbetzin Tziporah, 2000). They are encouraged to become wives and mothers within large families devoted to the strictest Torah Judaism way of life. While most ultra-Orthodox women receive schooling in Beis-Yaakov schools designed for them exclusively, the curriculum of these schools does not teach Talmud and neither encourages nor teaches its female students to study the same subjects as young ultra-Orthodox men in the ultra-Orthodox yeshivas. Moreover, the leaders of ultra-Orthodox Judaism perceive all forms of feminism as "Reform", as non-Jewish, or as a threat to Jewish tradition. The ultra-Orthodox claim is that feminism is changing Torah (Gordimer, 2013).

In fact, the existing system in ultra-Orthodox American Judaism is a patriarchy where men dominate women by setting values and rules, deciding what work is important, and determining sex roles. For ultra-Orthodox Jews, Halakhah continues to be a system of religious law, and other streams within Judaism, such as the Conservative, the Reform, and the Reconstructionist, relate to it too, in their own ways, treating it as a framework that, though less binding, continues to shape normative thought. Thus, the theological problem within a Jewish feminist framework stems from the importance of Halakhah and its status with ultra-Orthodoxy (Irshai, 2010).

Since the mid-twentieth century, converging factors have enabled ("ultra-orthodox") Jews to exert considerable influence on more moderate forms of observant Judaism

(Friedmann, 2009) which became dominated by fundamentalist views. Several recent studies argue that in the last two decades, American Orthodoxy as a whole has experienced a "slide to the right," and shifted from modern or centrist Orthodox ideologies and practices towards the ultra-Orthodox model (Samuel Heilman, 2006). Heilman and others (1989) characterize ultra-Orthodox communities as separatist, sectarian, and "enclavist." Heilman's recent "Sliding to the Right," characterizes ultra-Orthodox communities as reactionary and isolationist (Heilman, 2006) and so do others (Friedmann, 2009; Stolow, 2010).

"The future of Jewish law is, of course, in the hands of those who live by it (Friedmann, 2009). It still remains to be seen whether Jewish legal interpretation will remain on its course of increasing stringency, or adopt the more balanced approaches of the modern Orthodox. Moreover, if the lifestyle, tradition and customs that have shaped observant Judaism since the mid-twentieth century will continue, it remains to be seen how they will affect the women in the Jewish Orthodox community.

(iii) Jewish American Feminism and Traditional Judaism

Jewish feminism in America is a movement that seeks to improve the religious, legal, and social status of women within Judaism and to open up new opportunities for religious experience and leadership for Jewish women within all major branches of Judaism. Jewish feminism aims at the redefinition of woman's role so that it can be personally self-actualizing and communally fulfilling. Steven Martin Cohen (1980) perceives three main areas of the feminist critique of Judaism: the spiritual or religious dimension, the communal sphere, and the area of personal relations.

From Cynthia Ozick (1979) to Rachel Adler (1983) to Judith Plaskow (1990) and Susan Gubar (1994), Jewish women have explored their bitterness about their secondariness in their own heritage. Jewish feminist theorist and philosophers' works focusing on theology, such as Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990) her *Jewish Theology in Feminist Perspective* (1994), her *Jewish Feminist Thought* (2003) and Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (1998) have offered critiques of past and present practices and attempted to enhance the place of women in contemporary Jewish life.

Even within Orthodoxy, where it is perceived as a dangerous threat (Irshai, 2010), feminism has emerged. Tamar Ross (2000) is an Orthodox feminist who addresses the theological challenges posed by a feminist critique of Halakhah. The Halakhic framework presents a pertinent key issue which pertains to women's status in Judaism: the role of women in worship which has been debated for years (Greenberg 1981; Schneider 1984; Umansky 1988; Baker 1993; Heschel 1995).

Although American feminism and American traditional Judaism present vividly contrasting belief systems, some of the advocates of American Jewish feminism have attempted to resolve or reduce the tensions between these two contrasting philosophies of life. To achieve that they have employed a variety of ideological accommodations, adopting some circuitous paths designed to bridge the gap between feminist principles and the traditional Jewish community. Underlying all these areas of innovation is the central theological issue of authority. In questioning traditional conceptions of God or Torah, in agitating for halakhic change, in creating new liturgies and other forms of Jewish expression, feminists take the power both to criticize ancient traditions and to develop new forms that they hope will be part of the Judaism of the future.

Orthodox feminists' stubborn insistence on fighting their battle within the Orthodox framework rather than outside it may stem from the fact that Orthodoxy is their basic identity and they have no interest in alienating themselves from it (Ishrai, 2010). Feldman (1999), for example, states that Orthodox feminism works within the halakhic system and works with rabbis and rabbinical institutions to create more inclusive practices within Orthodox communal life and leadership. However, although they have little doubt that they are theologically equal to men, they do not directly challenge the social structural sources of gender inequality.

Non-Orthodox feminists argue that although these laws reflect the patriarchal assumptions of the society in which halakha was codified, the Bible itself does not support women's subordination (Frymer-Kensky 1994: 23-24). In recent decades Judaism seems to have moved toward greater equality for women, even within synagogue life (Greenberg 1981; 1983; Heschel 1995;). Ellen Umansky (1989) argues that women, in interaction with both traditional sources and one another, must be

open to “receiving” new understandings of themselves and of Jewish practices, concepts, and stories. Sacks (1989) puts contemporary American Jewish women in feminist context finding that modern Orthodox women are extremely conscious of their roles in building the very communities that supported the institutions in which they are supposedly subordinated. Sacks (1994) asserts that a postmodern reading of contemporary American Jewish feminism meets their needs for individual expression as scholars, professional Jews and religious Jews. This view distinguishes their Judaism from Orthodox Judaism, which answers other needs.

Much feminist work simply presupposes that Jewish tradition has been constructed by men and can be deconstructed and reconstructed by women (Plaskow, 1993, 489f). As she asked in an early article, if Halakhah is part of the Jewish system that women had no hand in creating, then “how can we presume that if women add their voices to the tradition, Halakhah will be our medium of expression and repair?” (Plaskow, 1983, 231). Judith Plaskow (1990) and Susannah Heschel (1995) among others, provide a more radical critique of women's status within Judaism. Plaskow, Baker (1993: 204) and Heschel (1995) suggest that Jewish women should not pursue equality with men, but should seek to transform Judaism entirely. Today the widespread assumption among scholars of Jewish feminism is that the question of power provides the key to understanding the issue. They believe, in principle, that Halakhah could incorporate egalitarian insights if women were able somehow to attain power more closely approximating the power held by those who dominate important religious positions; in that event, their interpretations of sources would be accepted as legitimate as well. As Susannah Heschel (2001) wrote: "Jewish feminism is not about equality with men. Feminism is about women's refusal to submit to male authority. The real issue is not equality, but power. Who's in charge? Who defines Judaism, and who determines whether or not we get to dance with the Torah?"

(iv) Jewish American Literature and Contemporary Jewish Women Writers

The turn of the millennium has witnessed a remarkable resurgence in the production of literature in the United States by Jewish-American writers and their characters reconnecting with Judaism. Jacobowitz (2004) noticed that “[i]nto the world of fiction then, slowly, come the daughters of the Orthodox.” Rosenbaum (1997) and a number of literary critics brought to light what Derek Parker Royal referred to as “a growing critical awareness of ... a Jewish American literary revival.” Numerous young Jewish

American writers were showing a “renewed interest in Jewish religion and culture” (Parker, 2004). According to Janet Handler Burstein (2001), Rosenbaum was the first to apply the term *New-Wave* to Jewish American writing of the 1980s and 1990s and it has henceforth been applied to a new creative phenomenon of American Jewish writers (Burstein, 2001). Their writing confirms Marcus Lee Hansen’s theory about third-generation immigrants who show a revived interest in their ancestor’s past (Appel, 1961), and this applies well to the "New Wave" authors and to the fictions they write although some may be second and some be fourth generation. Rosenbaum (1997) argues that the 21st century Jewish-American writers consider contemporary society’s materialism and consumerism as a foil to authentic Jewishness.

The new wave of writing portrays women that have a voice, as Jews, as women, as Americans (Horowitz, 2009). Although some novels mount a feminist argument against patriarchal restraints, other novels of this new wave depict the life of contemporary Jewish women in its full complexity. Instead of arguing against stereotypes of women, Jewish or not, these novels simply break these stereotypes in the characters they forge. Still, it seems that despite this awakened interest in Jewish religion and culture, it is far from a harmonious or devout image that emerges from most of the novels from the 1990s onwards (Judith Lewin, 2008). As Janet Burstein (2001) points out, “an often ambivalent gesture of recovery emerges vividly from these writings and distinguishes [the writers of the new wave] as a group” (803). Characters struggle with the place they must, or want to take in religion, the form of it, and the balance between religious and secular life. Susan Jacobowitz (2004) remarks that “[o]ften the daughters of the Orthodox are depicted as confused and deliberating, and almost all of them are in at least some degree of emotional confusion and pain” (p.74).

Andrew Furman (2000) explains how the literary revival of Jewish-American fiction represents its ‘transformation’ of religious and secular traditions into contemporary America (18). Wendy Shalit (2005) in her New York Times book review essay called “The Observant Reader” in 2005, targeted the representation of ultra-Orthodox Jews in contemporary American Jewish literature and film by non-ultra-Orthodox Jews who purport to describe the inner world of ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (Zierler, 2011). Nora L. Rubel's book (2010) echoes Shalit’s essay in many respects.

She exposes the harsh representations of the Orthodox community in novels and films created by nonmembers of this community. Michael Kramer (2011) observes that Rubel (2010) organizes the primary texts of her study into three categories. The first category comprises narratives in which ultra-Orthodoxy is questioned, the second shows Orthodoxy violently rejected and the third category consists of narratives in which more or less acculturated Jewish American parents are confronted with the haredization of their children. Lois E. Rubin (2005) in her comparative essay "The Creative Development of Seven Jewish Women Writers and Their Characters" reflects "the tensions" between Jewish and female identities. Rubin (2005) notes that the female and Jewish identities "connect" and support each other. Still, authors use a very different approach in portraying their character's struggle and their choice of protagonist can be related to their literary goals. Abraham (2005) and Goodman (2005), for example, express their goals in their essays in *Who we are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*. A recent critical study, *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*, Avery (2007) refers to a range of twentieth-century American women writers in essays by scholars who focus on the writers' tensions between their heritage and self-fulfillment, specifically between Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) and some version of feminism or assimilation or on these writers' perceptions of such tensions in society"(p.2). Avery (2007) specifically demonstrates that women writers in America are no longer divorcing themselves from their rich heritage.

Sylvia Barack Fishman (1998) observes that the female protagonists of late twentieth-century American Jewish fiction struggled with a multiplicity of identities: They were Jewish, Americans, daughters and wives and lovers and mothers; they were moderns—they were heirs to an ancient tradition. However, the proliferation of Jewish women writing--and being published--as America nears the turn of the twenty-first century literally speaks volumes about the preservation of women's visions and women's voices for the coming generations. Fishman (1998) remarks that most recently, a significant trend in writing by American Jewish women has been a dramatic turn toward more particularistic Jewish subjects, characters, and themes. Moreover, during the past few decades an increasingly significant group of female writers have focused directly on the American Jewish experience from the inside, many of them exploring the intersection between gender and ethnic and religious identity. Fishman (1998) notes that many American Jewish women writers focused on

gender role redefinition, often as part of an interface between Jewish values and mores and contemporary American life-styles and demographics. Other authors showed how negative feelings about womanhood, and specifically Jewish womanhood, could poison the relationship between Jewish mothers and daughters. By returning to Orthodoxy, Jewish women also return to patriarchy. Considering the development of the relations between men and women in the Western world of the 20th century, it is a step back to live in a male-centered community, and many female Jewish American writers are aware of that and show it in their writing. The novels see in them strengths and complexity (Horowitz, 2009). What I wish to show in my dissertation is that these contemporary Jewish women writers imagine the potential of change and the promise of the eradication of inequality between women and men.

e. Methodology

I will use Jewish feminist criticism to examine literature written by Jewish American women portraying Jewish American women at the turn of the millennium and to better understand their feminist perspectives. A feminist approach to epistemology maintains that women's ways of knowing and women's perspectives enable them to see things differently than do men thus perhaps helping them transcend their circumstances and feminism in this dissertation will be viewed as the empowerment of women as specified in the chapter *Scholarly Background*.

These literary texts, be they fictional narratives or memoirs, focus on the real experiences of individuals and groups in their own localities, within their own communities recognizing diversity and difference among women. Feminist literary theory, which itself draws on and transforms many other theoretical perspectives, will be employed when critiquing the texts so as to gain insight into the ways in which literature reflects the narrative of the hierarchically ordered male-female gender relationships and inequality which impact their social existence. This tool will be useful in raising questions over the central theme of the works written by female writers and their criticism of the marginalized role of women, their acceptance of religious systems of power dominated by men and their oppression in a patriarchal system which exploits and devalues them and the work they do while controlling knowledge and barring women from it.

f. Breakdown of Proposed Chapters

The thesis will consist of an introduction and six chapters. I will begin with an introduction comprising a survey of theories and studies that frame this thesis and provide a cultural and sociological background for Jewish American women's writing at the turn of the millennium. The first section will address the subject of Orthodoxy. In order to fully explore the connection between them and understand why this "return" to Jewish religion and culture is taking place, it is necessary to provide some background information on traditional Judaism as well as Jewish feminism in the US at the turn of the millennium. The next section will outline of developments in *Jewish feminism* and gender in the Orthodox society drawing on feminist and Jewish feminist theory, as well as gender theory, to examine the diverse ways in which the literature is shaped by and answers back to feminism to reflect changing views about feminism itself. The final section of this introduction will consist of contemporary Jewish women's literature.

Following the introduction I will attempt to explore Jewish American women's fiction written between 1980 and the present that is by or about Orthodox Jewish women and that engages conflict between feminism and Orthodoxy. I will offer contextualized close readings of these texts to gain fruitful insights into ways in which the authors represent women's diverse attempts to negotiate a fraught terrain. I will analyze these literary representations of Orthodoxy by examining challenging issues that recur throughout this corpus in the lives of contemporary American Jewish women: Jewish and humanistic agendas, Jewish identity, tension between religious and secular values and with their roles as women in the Jewish tradition, attitudes toward traditional sources, marital and gendered relationships, female embodiment, women's relationships with other women, including their daughters, women's religious observances, intellectual and sensual, personal and professional tensions, women's struggle against men and the power they hold; women as heroes who overcome adversities to achieve goals that are often commonplace among men, and women's righteous efforts to bring about a better world.

The writers that will be discussed in this thesis have chosen to represent the insular world of Orthodox Judaism in America and to show its complexities by portraying the struggles of its female partakers. Based on my preliminary research of the diversity of

women's writing on Orthodoxy, I have discerned several approaches to these issues which illuminate responses to feminism in modern literature and the ways in which women continue to be agents of change within Orthodoxy and Jewish culture. The responses to conflict between feminism and Orthodoxy that I have outlined here range from rejection of Orthodoxy and acts of leaving the fold to a range of attempts to synthesize tradition and modernity. Some authors reject and question, with varying degrees of ambivalence, Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy while others present Orthodoxy and women's life there from a positive perspective perceiving it as a refuge from a bankrupt secular culture. Some of the portrayals of female characters show a lack of satisfaction in their traditional, subservient roles as women in a patriarchal community and start to look for something outside the realm of Orthodoxy, hoping to find a way to develop as an individual. Some narratives portray acculturated Jewish American parents who are confronted with the children who have become ultra-Orthodox. Still other authors explore possibilities for synthesis between tradition and modernity, often employing feminist perspectives.

The first chapter of my literary exploration will focus on *girls in Orthodox families: from childhood to adulthood*. Some of the novels show negative feelings about womanhood, and specifically Jewish womanhood; it often poisons the relationship between Jewish mothers and daughters while fathers see girls as marginal compared to boys. For example: in Abraham Pearl's *The Romance Reader*, in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and *The Mind Body Problem*.

The second chapter will discuss *women in Orthodox families*, their marital relations and their position in the family. For example: in Naomi Ragen's *The Sacrifice of Tamar*, *Jephte's Daughter*, *The Tenth Song*, *Sotah*.

The third chapter will focus on *the Orthodox community* and their conformity of behavior, the limits, the boundaries, the lack of no freedom, and the lack of individual choice. Sometimes women are the threatening party as for example, the women in *Ladies' Auxiliary* by Tova Mirvis. Community is also shown in *Hush* by Eishes Hayil, Judy Brown, in Naomi Ragen's *The Sacrifice of Tamar* and *Chains around the Grass*.

The fourth chapter will portray *the women's quest for knowledge and the spiritual world*. Ilana Blumberg in *Houses of Study* differentiates between *hokhma* and *binah* in relation to Jewish women's quest for knowledge and the spiritual world. She describes *binah* as the "that mysterious form of knowledge, never precisely defined, which our ancient source told us inhered in women." Although many suggested to her that *binah* was enough, Blumberg's private whisperings to God was, "Teach me more than I need to know. Help me find *hokhmah*, Wisdom, acquired knowledge." Rachel in Pearl Avraham's – *The Romance Reader* –wants the freedom to ask questions and to disagree with the answers and so does Beth in *Seven Blessings* by Ruchama King.

The fifth chapter will discuss *the change model with the looming question of staying or leaving the fold*. From girlhood to womanhood – adopting an alternative model– the protagonists change throughout the plot and the culture conflict is there. The change in the characters (and sometimes within the community) is a process. Although there is no immediacy –it is constant... The process of change works in diverse ways– from Orthodox to more Orthodox or to less Orthodox, to modern Orthodox, to religious in some ways, inside the community in some ways and on the fringes of Judaism but never totally outside. There is no black or white – there are shades... some come into the fold and some leave it. Embracing all that is good in Judaism or divorcing oneself from one's roots. When you leave the Orthodox community there is a wall. The questions that will be asked: Are the parents – parents first or rather Orthodox Jews who reject their rebelling children? Is the love of the Orthodox for their children conditional and can the daughters who rebel accept that? Do the rebelling daughters who criticize the Orthodox community harshly, hate it? What do they expect of their parents? Some stay in the fold and some leave. Whatever the decision, the daughters of the Orthodox are portrayed in varying degrees emotional confusion and pain. For example, Leah Vincent's memoir *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after My Ultra Orthodox Girlhood* tells the story of one woman's struggle to define herself as an individual after she leaves the fold. It is a dark memoir offering a glimpse into the austere and uncompromising nature of a fundamentalist religious group and a young girl's survival after being exiled from it. *Deborah Feldman* was born and raised in the Hasidic community of Satmar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. She leaves the fold and at the age of 25 she published the memoir, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*. Much of her narrative

focuses on her wanting to feel control over her own destiny and ownership of herself. Eishes Chayil is a pseudonym meaning woman of valor, chosen by Judy Brown when *Hush* was first published because of feared backlash from her community. The author was raised in a world of Chassidic schools, synagogues, and summer camps and is a direct descendant of the major founders of and leaders in the Chassidic world. Following publication she has left the Chassidic community. Her protagonist, Gittel, forced to remain silent, begins to question everything she was raised to believe. This nuanced exploration of a complex world—one of humor, understanding, and horror—illuminates the conflict between yesterday's traditions and today's reality. Rachel in Pearl Avraham's – *The Romance Reader* stays but cannot wholly reconcile her views with those of the Orthodox community.

The sixth chapter of the literary analysis will focus on *a postmodern view of Judaism and self-realization*. Instead of arguing against stereotypes of women, Jewish or not, some of the novels discussed here simply break these stereotypes in the characters they forge. The new wave of writing portrays women that have a voice, as Jews, as women, as Americans. Ilana Blumberg's *Houses of Study* is a book situated in the Orthodox experience. It is an eloquent memoir of a Jewish woman's life and her efforts to reconcile the traditions of her faith with her belief in women's equality and the pull of modern American living. Ilana Blumberg captures the voice of a generation of religious Jewish women, in love with Judaism and in love with learning. Her experiences confirm and elucidate the complex negotiations in which any woman must engage in today's society. The focus is on gender and Jewish women's role in modernity. Self-realization, self-discovery, searching, questioning, growing, developing self-reliance and going beyond from inside out (Allegra Goodman's *Elizabeth in Kaaterskill Falls*) and from outside in (Batsheba in *The Ladies Auxiliary* by Tova Mirvis) within the context of the social religious scheme of things/ God/chevrutah learning/ women as scholars learning the Torah. The quest for self-realization is present in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* and *The Mind Body Problem*. Women reject *haredi* life but NOT Judaism in showing a desire for transformation of tradition. Tzippy in *The Outside World* by Tova Mirvis, rebels against the strictures of her lifestyle. *Sotah* and other books by Naomi Ragen promote ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. However, the relationship between feminism and Orthodoxy is impossible: women don't count as full people. The social system is enforced. What

sets the ultra-Orthodox apart is their understanding of gender roles and the place of women. The rift between liberal and Orthodox Jews is seen most clearly in attitudes about the place of women in Judaism. In *Loving Kindness* pp. 132-3 women's movement and secular feminism are examined. pp. 134-5 the Israeli setting and right wing Judaism.

What I have found based on my research so far, and intend to show in my dissertation, is that this fiction opens up a new avenue of expression and engages with the quiet revolution that is expanding women's public role in both Modern Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox society as women take on leadership positions, and expand their Jewish literacy. Moreover women writers do not reject either Orthodox Judaism or feminism, but instead develop plots and construct complex characters that blur the lines between secular and religious identity. Although some novels mount a feminist argument against patriarchal restraints, other novels of this new wave depict the life of contemporary Jewish women in its full complexity. Women can remain religious while giving a new interpretation to it. Religious Jewish identity in postmodern America shows the stance and identity of Jewish Orthodox women. Living within the Orthodox Jewish world and facing the conflicts which are created as those on the inside try to live in our 21st century. Women in these novels struggle with the place they must, or want to take in religion, the form of it, and the balance between religious and secular life.

I will consider realist heroines in realist novels and memoirs. My aim in writing this thesis is to illustrate that the contemporary Jewish American authors discussed here have imagined the experience of women in the Orthodox community in different ways, and because of this, the characters' experiences differ as well. In other words, I will argue that at the heart of each novel a different connection to Judaism is experienced by its main character. However, my reading of the writers whose work I address also shows that each one of them is attuned to a battle between dueling worlds. The fact that similar issues are being addressed by writers whose backgrounds and abilities vary seems to send the message that feminism, Judaism and contemporary social contexts intersect to create a group of distinctive issues for Jewish women.

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