INTRODUCTION

Jewish Orthodoxy emerged in response to the processes of modernization that occurred in the nineteenth century and has undergone changes over the course of the years. Diverse new forms of Orthodoxy are developing under this general heading, and accordingly there is no longer agreement regarding the key characteristics and boundaries that distinguish this stream from other streams of Judaism. As part of this development, a new orientation is emerging known as post-Orthodoxy or Orthopost. This trend has attracted research interest due to the highly elusive nature of its definition and characteristics.

Simultaneously, and as part of these developments, religious feminism in the U.S. and Israel began to carve out a path at the end of twentieth century, raising the demand for equality in Torah study and in the men’s section in synagogues. Women’s integration into the world of Torah knowledge led to the growth of *midrashot* for women’s Torah studies and the emergence of female rabbinical leaders (*to’anot*). The area of prayer, meanwhile, has seen the emergence of egalitarian *minyanim* in which women play an active role in leading prayers and running the synagogue.

The overlap between the characteristics of post-Orthodoxy and certain significant aspects of Orthodox feminism has led to research interest in the nature of these ideological categories and explorations of the diverse manifestations they include. One of the most prominent manifestations is the issue of women in the world of prayer, which has received increasing attention from women from various backgrounds, including the first groundbreaking examples of gatherings of women for the purpose of prayer.

The first section of the article will offer a theoretical discussion regarding the nature of Orthodox Judaism, post-Orthodoxy, and Orthodox feminism. This will be followed by a description of a prayer group. The third section will explore the significance of this initiative in terms of its identity and will examine it as a post-Orthodox phenomenon.

1. **Theoretical Aspects**

*What is Orthodox Judaism?*

Conventional wisdom regards Orthodoxy as the reaction of traditional Judaism’s religious leadership to the crisis that emerged in the nineteenth century with regards to Jewish religious behavior and community authority; the crisis arose following the promise of Emancipation and the opportunities presented by modernity[[1]](#footnote-1). Brown (2000) sketches a broad spectrum of responses, ranging from the sweeping religious radicalization that emerged in Hungary to a more moderate form of Orthodoxy in Germany, within which secondary streams emerged over the generations (Brown 2000, 311).

Over decades of research, a consensus appears to have existed regarding the meaning of the term “Orthodox Judaism,” and the boundaries between this stream and other streams of Judaism were clearly delineated. In recent years, however, these insights and points of agreement have increasingly been undermined as doubts have emerged concerning the nature of Orthodoxy. Ravitzky (2006) succinctly summarized these uncertainties as follows:

“Is there any justification to continue speaking of “Orthodox” Jews or of “Orthodox” Judaism? If the inner cohesion of the camp is called into question, the enemy changes their face time and again, and even the relationship between the old and the new is no longer clear enough, is it still possible to grant this camp clear markings of identity? And if the borders separating Orthodoxy externally have become blurred while the inner lines running through it have sharpened, is this still truly one single faction before us?” (Rabbiitzky, 2006: 7)

A variety of researchers have looked at these questions, regarding the nature of Orthodoxy and its borders, focusing on the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Sagi (2006), notes that the accepted Orthodox discourse does not see tradition as a developing work in progress, but rather one which is signed and sealed. This, then, has led to the dichotomy which emerged between tradition and modernism, with Orthodoxy being identified with tradition. This dichotomy acted, and continues to act, as a foundation within Orthodox discourse, which is in turn based upon three central tenets. The first of these is the emphasis upon the dichotomy split between tradition and modernity through the complete rejection of modernistic features while clinging to those characteristics associated with tradition. The second facet is recognizing the existence of a contradiction between the modernist and the traditional foundations, and the manner in which it has transformed into the central feature of religious life.

At the basis of the third tenet is a position stating that Judaism as a religion inherently contains modernistic elements, and therefore, the force of the dichotomy is reduced. This argument may be found in various Modern Orthodox circles and is expressed through integration of modernist and traditional characteristics (Sagi, 2006: 42).

Libman (1982) addresses Israeli reality, and suggests that the Orthodox response to modernity is expressed in two main ways: neo-traditionalism and Modern Orthodoxy.

The neo-traditionalist response seeks to preserve tradition by rejecting the modern, and supports cultural and social isolationism. The Modern Orthodox response, associated in Israel with the religious Zionism, may be divided into three ideal types, who espouse Jewish commitment to Halacha, without, however, rejecting the main cultural, social or national values of the modern world, which are as follows:

Adaptation – within this type there is no conflict between the values of modernism and Judaism, and in effect, the values are seen as inherent to Jewish tradition. Those who espouse adaptation inject new interpretation into tradition, and the proponents have included, for example, Rabbi Goren.

Compartmentalization - in this case, similar to neo-traditionalism, there is a desire to preserve tradition untainted, though through a reduction of those aspects of life to which it is relevant and a simultaneous expansion of those aspects of life considered neutral from a religious or Jewish point of view and thus legitimately fair game for the influence of modernity. The compartmentalization response is associated with the neo-Orthodox community which emerged in Germany during the 19th century, and with whom Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was associated (Libman, 1982: 232-237).

Expansion and gaining control: This type accepts modernity in its renewed interpretation through the lenses of Jewish tradition. Each of its two branches seek to grant titles to each of life’s components, in keeping with the specific interpretation given it in Judaism. There is no absolute version of this type in existence, leading, to a certain degree, to an overlap with adaptation on the one hand and with neo-Traditionalism (in its Zionist version) on the other. One of the branches, known as “religious liberals” implements the expansion and increased control through adaptation; in other words, by adapting religious tradition to reality through re-interpretation (Cohen, 2005:19). In Israel, Geiger (2002: 51-52) named this branch ‘the new religious Zionism’; characterized by the legitimacy it grants modernity as a formative force, along with religious sources, in its grasp of the process of halachic decisions as inherently social-cultural, and in its willingness to critique the rabbinic authorities not only in areas which are not halachic, but also regarding the halacha itself. In terms of patterns of behavior, most religious liberals are characterized by extreme openness to the non-religious environment, in their participation in it and in the adoption of secular patterns which in some cases are in conflict with halachic norms as they are understood by conservatives. They do not feel there is a conflict between those behaviors considered clearly “secular” and their own consciousness of themselves as religious (Sheleg, 2000: 54-56).

The second branch, known as “nationalist Haredi”, objects to changes in Jewish tradition, as in the case of compartmentalization, and goes as far as to reject any division between the various areas of existence, while espousing the sanctification of all areas of life and thus the idea of a sanctified State (Libman, ibid).

*What is Post-Orthodoxy?*

In the world of research, as in Modern Orthodoxy, attempts are made to characterize and re-define Orthodoxy, in order to allow it to include as many sub-streams as possible within it, as shown above. Among the attempts one could note Gili Zivan (2001: 89-90) and Aviezer Rabbitzky (1999: 161-177), who sought to facilitate the creation of a cultural-community spectrum between Modern Orthodoxy and the concept of the initial Orthodoxy; these attempts, however, have not been free of difficulties.

This attempt to unite communities has now become increasingly difficult in Israel, in light of the situation which has emerged from within Modern Orthodoxy itself and which threatens its borders both internally and externally. In recent years a new religious discourse and religious trends have developed which have breached the borders of the known Modern-Orthodox definition. Roznak (2006: 129) refers to this trend as Post-Modern Orthodoxy, or in short, Orthopost, based on its characteristic internalization of elements taken from the post-modern world and incorporated into the system of thought.

“…a discourse of sorts has infiltrated Modern Orthodox society which owes much to the concept of religious thought without metaphysics, the neutralization of the religious significance of history, the construction of a community-based religion devoid of illusion, and dependent upon man’s awareness of a “superior presence”.” (Zivan, 2001).

Among the notable personalities who contributed to this discourse are Rabbi Soloveichik, Prof. Yeshayahu Leibovitz and Rabbi Prof. David Hartman- though one could also add more radical characters to this list (Roznak: 138).

Orthopost’s position is pluralist, and recognizes that its world represents one option out of a variety of legitimate options. The sanctification of borderlines within the Orthodox-religious discourse is not part of their world view, and they respect the identity choices of others (Roznak, 2006: 130).

Insofar as the halachic decision-making (Psika) hierarchy is concerned, Orthopost adapts various patterns which differ from those of Orthodoxy in all its variants, and does not seek authoritative teachers. There are rabbis seen as inspirational, who despite having received Orthodox smicha for the rabbinate, differ in their world view from that of rabbis from the central stream, serving as objects of the criticism which portrays them as groundbreaking and Conservative, particularly in the matter of halachic equality between the sexes.

This image strengthens the sociological claims in recent years regarding the manner in which hybridity in religious practice has become a central theme in analyzing certain trends in the religious metamorphosis (Cohen and Eisen: 2004, Pieterse: 2000).

The socially constructed nature of social hybridity is reflected in its designation as something that overcomes the boundaries between things that were previously separated (Bullick and Schroer, 2015: 215).

In fact, insofar as religious streams in Judaism, one could say that in the past the distinction between religious and secular, as well as among the various religious streams was completely isolationist, while today it is notable that these separations are nowhere near as clear-cut as in the past.

The two fields which are most notable vis-à-vis their importance within the hybridity of conservative religions are those approaches which are changing with regard to the hierarchy of religious authority (Berger, 2014: 48f), and the breaking of the religious borders with other streams/ groups. Israel-Cohen (Israel-Cohen, 2012) claims that traces of hybridity have become integrated into Modern Orthodox Judaism in Israel. She initially mentions the criticism directed towards the rabbinical authorities of the State from within Modern Orthodoxy which is in turn leading to pluralization in halachic decision-making. Cohen-Israel then expresses doubt regarding those borders which were taken as a given, focusing within this context on the blurring of boundaries among Modern Orthodoxy and Conservatives; suggesting the label “Conservadox” (Israel-Cohen, 2012: 111). As with other researchers, she addresses Post-Orthodoxy and posits the idea that these voices emerging from her research belong to this analytical group (ibid, 115).

A crucial pre-condition for the hybrid religious identity is individual thought, and thus, the search for deep experiences in all aspects of religious life (and other areas of life), as one of the components most closely associated with Orthopost. The emphasis on prayer is not implemented based on detailed Halacha, but rather on the “connection” of the worshipper to the prayer experience. This is how frameworks have been created for new spiritual communities for whom the prayers have taken on a more Chassidic and “aesthetic” bent, within the Orthodox community (Roznak, 2006: 131). The most prominent group in this range is Breslov Chassidim.

Roznak describes Post-Orthodoxy as a phenomenon of individuals, interested in changing patterns of thought and the understanding of religious life from within the boundaries of the Modern orthodox community. Many of these people grew from the world of Modern Orthodox yeshivas and some are ordained for the rabbinate, and are strict about broad-based daily learning. On the other hand, Zisser and Libman (2004) describe Orthopost as being composed of those who left the Modern Orthodox community. According to Zisser[[2]](#footnote-2), there are certain characteristics required by Post-Orthodoxy, including: familiarity with classic Jewish tradition, a love-hate relationship with Orthodoxy, and an inability to adopt secular life as an alternative to the religious life. “Being Post-Orthodox this means being a Jew in a tight spot; too cynical to believe, to committed to leave…this is therefore the home of homeless Jews” (Zisser and Libman 2004:19). He describes Post-Orthodoxy as those whose daily lives take place, for the most part, within the secular world, in which they also raise their children. However, secularism does not serve as a true home for them. In his opinion, Post-Orthodox Jews “are on the fence”, given that other streams of Judaism do not appear to them to be a serious alternative.

The description of Post-Orthodoxy, as brought above, is based upon researchers from the field of Judaism, and describes it as a global life-space in conflict with the Orthodox experience in many senses, and as one which shatters terminology intended to classify and categorize Orthodox reality, and marking its symbolic limits. Sociological research, however, regarding said limits teaches that ‘the symbolic boundary is a wide line, within whose space there may co-exist new and dynamic forms of social and cultural identity. These forms do not necessarily exist based on resistance to a ‘limit defining’ center, but rather from having made peace with it.’ (Leon, 2010: 223).

In effect, Post-Orthodoxy is not actually a stream within Judaism and thus Leon uses the term “flow”, based on the anthropologist Appadurai and the interpretation given to it by Ben Rafael (2007) in the Jewish context. He examines the “Post-Orthodox flow” in Israeli Judaism and focuses on the settler generation.

“Post-Orthodoxy is flow. It functions as an interactive, liquid movement within the space of Jewish life which grows from Orthodoxy and within it, though it exists beyond Orthodoxy’s logic- the logic which traps the Orthodox Jew within an abundance of distinctions, warnings, hesitation and reservations which contribute to one’s demarcation within the boundaries of the community which he chose or into which he was born.”(Leon, 2006: 229) “…nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see Post-Orthodoxy as a space in conflict with Orthodox existence. Post-Orthodoxy, as it is differentiated from Modern Orthodoxy, is a space of common religious existence both for Orthodox and non-Orthodox forms (ibid, 240).

*Orthodoxy, Feminism and What Lies Between Them*

Beyond the Halachic issues, one of the central symbols separating Orthodoxy form other streams is female involvement in the public space of religious life. Hartman (2007), in referring to the harmonization response of Modern Orthodoxy notes that as a movement which incorporates modernity, it is also open to the idea of feminism, though its demands threaten to destabilize the ground upon which the patriarchal structure is built. Feminism is therefore seen as a framework which cannot be reconciled with the Torah and with traditional life, and represents one of the bodies of knowledge and values which are hardest for the religious world to digest (Hartman, 2007:8).

With the integration of women into the public sphere, a resistance began to emerge among religious women- from the 70’s in the United States and from the 90’s in Israel- vis-à-vis the lack of gender equality which existed within the Orthodox community (Teitelbaum, 2001: 18). In the United States, the religious-feminist struggle grew out of the women’s desire for equality during religious practice whose center and core were in the synagogue. In Israel, on the other hand, the struggle for equality focused more on equal opportunity to learn Torah (Mirsky, 2007: 47; Kehat, 2008: 49). Despite the differences in context and emphasis, the common ground of Orthodox feminism’s fight, unlike among non-Orthodox streams, lay in the desire to bring about change within the boundaries of Orthodox halacha which, as stated, is considerably less open to change, if at all (Koren 2011:69).

In the opinion of Israel-Cohen (Israel-Cohen, 2012), Orthodox feminism is a hybrid category within which certain varieties overlap with Post-Orthodoxy (Israel-Cohen, 2012). In her research, she examines the views of feminist activists vis-à-vis questions of religious authority and ties among the various streams. It emerges from her findings that the perspectives of those surveyed point to a new pattern of thought within Orthodoxy and reflect the development of a hybrid religious identity, which though it remains tied to the status of women, goes beyond gender dynamics. Those surveyed suggest that Orthodoxy needs to introduce a more pluralist system of religious authority and grant greater legitimacy to individual perspectives within the framework of halacha.

Yannai-Ventura (2014) as well seeks to read the dynamic of the religious feminist identity as a process of hybrid production. According to her argument, one should not perceive the process as a series of adaptations between religion and feminism, nor through the breach between the categories of feminism and religion. She suggests calling it religious feminist identity, without hyphenation. “The broader significance of this move is that religious feminist identity is not a mechanical coupling, nor is it a blending of feminism and religion. The dialectic between feminism and religion expands the categories, questions the conflicts between them and creates a new theoretical category which is religious feminism as a shared space.” (Yannai-Ventura, 2014:5)

The above critics do not accept the argument that this is a movement which has gone outside the bounds of Orthodoxy. Israel-Cohen takes this stance based on a series of reasons, including the fact that this sort of claim runs counter to the position of the women themselves; they feel this is their home despite the deep tensions. Furthermore, this argument locates Orthodoxy alongside forces moving toward fundamentalism within Orthodox society, while ignoring those voices encouraging Orthodoxy toward an increased pluralism. In addition, the hybridity reflected in the research could be one way to allow the religion to change over time and retain its relevancy (Israel-Cohen, 2012: 118).

As with Israel-Cohen, Roznak too (2006) links Orthodox feminism and Post-Orthodoxy at the ideas level, and has labeled a significant portion of the phenomena which emerged from Orthodox feminism (mixed batei-midrash, women’s minyans, women reciting Kaddish in synagogue) “Orthopost feminism” (Roznak, 2006: 133-135).

One of the manifestations of religious feminism which has recently gained strength is women’s prayer. This does not refer to prayers led by women in egalitarian minyans or to the reciting of Kaddish in mixed minyans, but rather to the deeper change which seeks out the female voice and shading in the prayer. Lighter versions of this search require a change from the first person male to the female (such as in “Modeh Ani”). One of those leading this charge is Prof. Tamar Ross (Ross, 1999). Other versions may create a more significant change.

Leon (2010) gives the example of the book “Women’s Prayer” by Aliza Lavi (2005) as demonstrating Post-Orthodox flow. The book contains prayers written by and for Jewish women during different periods and in various geographical locations. Most of these are requests and pleas from different moments in the yearly cycle and in the cycle of life, and a few are liturgical poems (Piyut). According to him, the book acts as “…a textual anchor for the space of Jewish life which is not perceived as obligatory – and perhaps even as subversive – in relation to the regimented discourses of Orthodoxy, both traditional and modern. It seems as if the book provides an echo of the desire to anchor the same “Judaism beyond”. It appears, therefore, as if Lavi’s liturgical book is an expression of the Post-Orthodox flow occurring as well within religious-Zionist feminism, and which assists it in moving from a formalist movement focused on studying the canon and critiquing it, to a spontaneous community experience, which creates alternative canons which do not necessarily stem from critique of that which exists, but rather as a completion of it through the expansion of its boundaries…” (Leon, 2010: 238).

As emerges from the above survey, Post-Orthodoxy is not a phenomenon which can be clearly characterized or associated, or not, with a particular stream of Judaism. To a large degree, it could be said that the characteristics associated with share an impressive amount of common ground with the liberal religious branch (Libman) of Modern Orthodoxy. One could, just as easily, point to patterns shared with other streams. This claim is relevant as well for the various manifestations of Orthodox feminism. There are those researchers who see the individuals who adopt it as part of their Orthodox existence, while others portray these individuals as having left Orthodoxy, and yet others address the range of backgrounds from which the individuals have come.

**Women’s Prayers**

There are numerous testimonies from the Talmudic period and up through the eighteenth century regarding women who prayed daily and even three times a day at home, or in the synagogue, just as the men did. Below are a number of examples representing different places and eras:

Zimmer (1996) mentions a debate in the Jerusalem Talmud regarding a city of priests (Cohanim), where once they had given the priestly blessing (Birkat Cohanim) during the repetition of the Amida prayer, women and children would answer amen. He extrapolates from this that given that during the Talmudic period the priests gave the blessing (Birkat Cohanim) every day, we then learn that women were present on a regular basis in the synagogue (Yitzchak Zimmer, 1996: 132-133).

In the book Sefer Chassidim from the Middle Ages, the story is told of a woman who prayed Shacharit each day of the week in the synagogue and who once walked out before the congregation had finished prayers and was criticized by her husband for leaving early: “You sinned by leaving the synagogue early!” (Sefer Chassidim, Vistinsky Ed., pp 465).

The Jews of Italy were noteworthy among the Jewish communities of the Middle Ages in this context, due to the significant place of women within the public-religious space. Adelman (2001) explains that in 16th century Verona the women fought over the order of seating in the synagogue, until seats were finally permanently assigned, according to the personal status of the women. These women knew how to pray and even composed a significant number of prayers of their own, many of which were included in Aliza Lavi’s book.

(Adelman, Howard Tzvi. "Italian Jewish Women at Prayer." Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages Through the Early Modern Period (2001: 52.)

In the Jerusalem Takanot (regulations) from 1730, women were forbidden to stay for the final Kaddish in each of the three prayers in order to avoid having the men look at them. In other words, there were women in each of the prayers. (AH Freiman, ed., 1949: 208, 210).

Notwithstanding, in nearly all of the cases which mention their participation in the prayers in the synagogue, they are situations in which the women are located in the women’s section (Ezrat Nashim), and participate in prayers being led by men.

It is interesting to note that in the 13th century in Ashkenaz, in addition to the women’s section, there were rooms which served as synagogues in which the women gathered for prayer and supplications, and which were run by “Ba’alot tfila” (Teitlebaum, 2011). The male world had no objection to this phenomenon precisely as they had never opposed other female ceremonies. After all, this was not a service parallel to that run by the men in their section, and certainly did not contain the “problematic” sections such as the repetition of the Amida or Torah reading from the scroll (Sperber, 2001: 365-366).

As mentioned, in the United States and in Israel the modern era brought with it the flourishing of egalitarian congregations and minyans. In Israel however, there is a unique example of a group of women who formed a congregation in all senses of the term, which holds services every Shabbat; one which runs absolutely parallel to the men’s.

This group serves as a test group for the analytical category of Post Orthodoxy and religious feminism.

The Neve Daniel Prayer Group

The origins of this prayer group can be traced to Simchat Torah 15 years ago, when a new member of the yishuv who did not feel at ease with the service in the national-religious synagogue invited a number of women to her living room for prayers. On the following Shabbat, they used the yishuv’s information sheet to invite the women of the yishuv for services, as well as “marketing” it door to door. This same woman identified with the young mothers who had to walk a fair distance in order to pray and understood their need to do so. In effect, even women who lived far away came to her home.

Four years later, they received permission to pray in the Community Center’s nursery, and as the group expanded, they moved into a caravan belonging to the local authority. Insofar as their official status, they are a group within the yishuv, however, for practical reasons they are not recognized as an association.

Each Shabbat (Maariv, Shacharit and Mussaf), they gather in the house of prayer and conduct the prayers at the same time as the accepted service in the men’s section. The only unusual thing is the “Dvarim Shebakdusha”, which they avoid, given that they are not said when there are less than ten (of a minyan of men).

Prayers are generally nusach Sefarad, though each of the cantors introduces some of her own elements. For example, an Italian tune for the Shabbat Shir shel Yom. Generally, the women do not include prayers which were written by women over the generations. Nonetheless, before holidays, they compose texts of their own. For example, before Shavuot or Purim, they write a new Megillah, though the original text remains the one used during services. Occasionally voices emerge requesting renewal within the service, but most of the women are interested in sticking to the traditional form of the service and feel that there is actually great force in remaining faithful to the old and familiar style.

In contrast with many Modern Orthodox minyans which hold a children’s minyan in which they say the more important prayers and hear the Parashat HaShavua, there is no such service in the women’s group; not because there is any sense of lack of legitimacy regarding the presence of children, but rather the opposite. The children have a play corner within the structure where the women pray, and are not scolded, even when the games are noisy.

Following the Torah reading there is a conversation on Parashat HaShavua. This is not a sermon given by one of the women, but rather an open, democratic debate led by each of the women of the group on a rotating basis. The discussion may sometimes be led by learned women, using a page of sources, and other times by someone leading the talk based on intuitive thoughts.

During the aliyot, as is the custom, a woman who experienced a miracle and was saved, makes the HaGomel blessing, but only after she has shared the story of what she is thankful for with all of the women.

Given that this is a congregation which accompanies women throughout the entire life cycle, when one of them celebrates a bar or bat-mitzvah for their children, there are a number of patterns which emerge. Some of the families choose to celebrate their child’s bar mitzvah within a regular synagogue, in order to include their friends who may not be willing to come to a women’s service. Most of the women, however, choose to celebrate within the framework of the women’s prayers and in many families, the men join in. In others, the men pray separately and arrive only for the Torah reading and for Kiddush, which is, of course, made by a woman. In the event of a bat mitzvah, the men hear the reading from behind a curtain. At the end of the service there is a Kiddush in which each member of the congregation brings one of her homemade offerings. Thus, unity is ensured for the standards of the Kiddush and there is no competition. Kiddushim are held at other moments in the women’s lives, such as when a son or daughter is inducted into the IDF.

There have been a range of reactions to the prayer group, and today as well, there are those who refer to them disparagingly as “Reform”. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the moment that the group began to contact key figures in the outer environment (the head of the religious council, the head of the local authority), the level of fear vis-à-vis the group dropped significantly. Insofar as the women’s partners, most of them display complete understanding and support the women’s group. Still, however, there are women who attend their partner’s synagogue during the holidays, in order to avoid confrontation.

The women’s group meets on weekdays as well, to address a range of halachic issues as well as more practical matters. Issues arising through external relations with those around them (administrative and religious management of the yishuv) have led to the following questions: How much should they invest in the group’s visibility? Which building would serve for services as they wish and what help are they eligible for? Decisions are made by majority rule.

As of now, relations with the local authority are not tense and indeed better than that, but the municipality will not release an official document granting legitimacy to the women’s group. Thus, the group has decided to open a Facebook page, whose purpose is to raise funds to renovate the building, as well as involving more women in the ceremonies and the experience.

**The Neve Daniel Women’s Group: Hybrid Religious Identity and Post Orthodoxy?**

As we try to characterize the prayer group, we will address analytical categories such as the hybrid religious identity and post-Orthodoxy, which overlap to a great degree in the context of religious feminism.

As we stated, a precondition for the hybrid religious identity is individual thought, and consequently, the search for a deeper experience in all areas of religious life, as one of the components most closely identified with Orthopost. Individual thought is a crucial tool in the search for a way to reach the most appropriate content and form for the seeker. The women of the Neve Daniel group are guided by independent thought, both at the level of discourse and regarding halachic practice. In effect, they serve, through their actions, as the antithesis to the “herd” phenomena which characterize human groups as a whole and the residents of community yishuvim in particular. The endless democratic debates by the women to ensure that “G-d should hear our voices” in the manner which is correct for each woman and for the group as a whole, serve as a precondition for the hybridity. Even today, some 15 years after the founding of the group, the women continue to question things and debate what is right for them, and what their dreams are for the future within this context. For example, prior to Shavuot one year, the women traveled to the desert to pray at sunrise, and in a partner discussion, each women expressed to her partner what she loved in the Torah, which parts were difficult for her and what the bridge was which she sought.

Two areas which stand out with the hybrid thinking process of conservative religions is the changing approaches to the hierarchy of religious authority and the breaching of religious boundaries with other streams.

The changing approach to the hierarchy of religious authority is characteristic of Orthopost as well, and insofar as everything related to the hierarchy of psika (decision making) and the manner of its practice, it adopts patterns which differ from Orthodoxy in all its versions, does not seek teachers as authority figures, and along with this, employs rabbinical figures solely as a source of inspiration.

The clear policy in all which regards halachic issues is to not request a psika (decision) from a rabbi. The main reason for this is the fact that some of the women of the group are learned women who have undertaken advanced Torah and halachic studies at some of religious Zionism’s most prestigious institutions, and some have learned alone; they know how to seek out the relevant sources and grant each consideration or source the weight it deserves when arriving at a decision. A further reason for this is their will to avoid a political situation arising with among rabbis. On rare occasions, there is a specific question posed by one of the women to a rabbi who is acceptable to her, for the purpose of consultation alone.

In addition, when dealing with significant halachic matters, the decision is usually taken not to decide, and in effect, the only significant halachic decision accepted right at the start was to avoid reciting the sections known as “Dvarim Shebikdusha” (the term will be clarified further along).

In any case, even in cases in which a decision is taken, this occurs by consensus and not through majority decisions, as the social makeup of the group is highly diverse and there is a desire to ensure that all feel comfortable with decisions. Thus, in effect, the most basic common ground is achieved, which reflects concessions made, particularly by the more “militant” wing of the group.

The outcome of avoiding decisions is a lack of uniformity and standardization. For example, some of the women make the blessings on the Torah when they go up, while others choose not to.

The actions described above definitely represent an approach which differs from the traditional view of the hierarchy of authority in two ways; first, by making rabbinic decision making irrelevant to the congregation, and further, by leaving the various halachic issues unresolved, while creating differences within the management. Neither of these viewpoints is characteristic of traditional Orthodox minyans.

Questioning halachic authority, in this context, changes validity as well given that this is a community yishuv with regulations stating that the rabbi is the spiritual leader of the yishuv. The moment that the women’s group refused to accept his decisions, they were no longer able to receive space in the yishuv information sheet. They nonetheless are careful not to mention the rabbi in their meetings.

The second field which stands out in the hybridity of conservative religions is a blurring compared with other streams. This situation is manifested in a complex manner within the Neve Daniel prayer group. On the one hand, the very fact that the women are not satisfied with the traditional mold in which women participate passively in the prayers led by men contains a wink towards Conservative and Reform Judaism in which services led by women are among the most flagrant features. On the other hand, the very fact of separation from the men in order not to trespass against halachic decisions of the central stream of Orthodoxy regarding the definition of a “minyan” (for the purpose of reciting “Dvarim Shebikdusha”), and the gender of the person leading the services (shaliach tzibur) whose role is to help the congregation fulfill their duties, act as a means of sticking to the central stream of Orthodoxy while distancing themselves from stretching the boundaries. This is in contrast to those egalitarian minyans, the majority of which have women reading from the Torah and acting as prayer leaders during Maariv, with some doing so during all services and reciting all prayers (such as the Klausner congregation in Jerusalem). We should note that in the majority of minyans, the members define themselves as Orthodox, while basing the changes they have implemented on halachic sources and their interpretations of them.

The women of the group do not recite the Dvarim Shebikdusha (Kaddish, Barchu, Chazarat HaShatz, priestly blessing and the Torah blessings), although in order to not shorten the service and remove the significant sections at the level of the program and the text, they do not skip it by doing the following: on Shabbat they recite sections of the Chazarat HaShatz without a blessing, and on the High Holy days the Shlichat Tzibur prays the entire Chazarat HaShatz without a blessing.

The only exception within the context of Dvarim Shebikdusha is the Torah reading. Some of the women in the congregation were opposed in the past to reading from the Torah scrolls (based on a decision by the Rabbi of the yishuv) and thus the decision was made that Torah reading would not take place in a public building. Since the congregation has grown and they have moved into a trailer, they do read from a scroll, but not every Shabbat. When they read from the scrolls, most of the women in the congregation recite the Torah blessings in full, however others, who are uncomfortable, say a version which does not end with a blessing- in other words, without the name of G-d. In any event, during Torah reading, the “Mi SheBerach” prayer is recited with a slight alteration, changing the mention of forefathers to mothers, and with no blessing.

In his article, Rabbi Aryeh Avraham Frumer (1986) mentions three methods vis-à-vis adding women to a minyan. According to the first method, it should be permitted in cases in which there is an obligation as there is for the men, for example, Megillah. Thus, even though women are obligated for individual prayer, they are released from public prayer and thus they do not join a minyan for purposes of prayer. The second method distinguishes between a minyan for “kiyum” (fulfilling) and one for “pirsum” (publication). When the purpose of the mitzvah is only in its publication, women join the minyan even if the level of their obligation is less than the men’s.

The third method rules out women’s participation in any matters related to the minyan. (The source is from the Talmud, Brachot, and there are other sources which support this view). The argument runs that given that women are not worthy of completing a minyan, they are similarly unable to participate in Torah reading even in cases when they too are obligated. According to this method the decision is not based on the women’s level of obligation but rather according to their permanent status as women who cannot join a minyan for the purpose of Kiddush HaShem.

In fact, the greatest of the achronim decreed that women may join the minyan for the purpose of publication, such as for the Megillah reading. A debate remains regarding women joining the “inyan shebiKdusha”, given that this is a classic example of something whose purpose is to sanctify G-d’s name in public, in other words, publication. According to Rabbi Frumer, having women join a minyan for Kiddush Hashem is possible only according to the first method. It should be noted that there are rabbis who were ordained by the Orthodox establishment and who define themselves as Orthodox and do not see any true halachic issue with women reading in a women’s minyan. Insofar as the identity of the prayer leader (Shaliach Tzibur), the general rule is “anyone who is not obligated cannot fulfill the obligation for others” (Mishna Rosh Hashana Gimel, Chet), and thus one who is obligated is able to fulfill the obligation for others. This principle is implemented in several cases including blowing the shofar, birkat hamazon and Megillah reading, in which there is a comparison between the person obligated and the one fulfilling the obligation for others (Tos. Brachot Heh, Yod Dalet-Yod Zayin, Tos, Megillah Bet, Zayin-Chet), but no definitive decision is made regarding the Chazarat HaShatz.

Similarly, Orthopost’s position is a pluralist one and sanctification of the boundaries in the religious-Orthodox discourse is not part of its world-view (Roznak ???).

Thus, it emerges from the interviews with the women of the group that they do not spend time on definitions and self-identification with particular streams and further, are not even interested in the definitions granted them by their surroundings in this context. In addition, they believe that in any case, there is no objective way of measuring according to which one could determine whether a particular house of worship/synagogue is Orthodox or not.

The hybridity of Orthodox feminism, according to Yannai-Ventura, is manifested in the creation of a new theoretical category, which is religious feminist, as a shared space instead of a mechanical link between these two identities. This sense of hybridity is also expressed in the prayer groups; the creation of the prayer and of the congregational life within the group testify to the process of identity creation which is not reliant upon the feminism/religion dichotomy and which does not require artificial mediation or division between the religious and the feminist spaces.

**Conclusion: The Prayer Group and Orthodoxy: In or Out?**

The themes presented thus far verify the women’s group as belonging to the Post-Orthodoxy trend. The question which arises is, in which sense? Do they belong as part of the trend which grew out of Modern Orthodoxy and crossed the boundaries? Is it more a question of the trend which finds itself on the line between Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism, or is this a matter of a phenomenon which is occurring within Modern Orthodoxy?

First, as emerged from the literary survey, there is no agreement regarding an objective acid test which would dichotomically decide in each case whether it responds to the definition of “Orthodox”. Furthermore, Post-Orthodoxy is not an institutionalized stream of Judaism and thus, despite the existence of characteristics seen as relevant to Post-Orthodoxy, there is no way to determine whether this is in fact an act in opposition to Orthodoxy or one which is fully Orthodox. Identity, which is self-defining and thus subjective, is what determines the essence, as the definitions are not unequivocal or divisive, as we saw above. The women define themselves as Orthodox and as obligated by halacha, although in the same breath they admit that certain things they do are not acceptable to broad swathes of the religious society within which they live.

As stated previously, Israel-Cohen and Yannai Ventura do not accept the argument that this is a movement which is leaving Orthodoxy. Furthermore, according to Israel-Cohen, the hybridity reflected in the research may be a way to permit the religion to change with the times while remaining relevant (Israel-Cohen, 2012).

Thus, the women of the prayer group view halacha as a process and therefore their forecast for the future (whether near of far-off) is that the halachic definitions of Orthodoxy, including the definition of a minyan, will metamorphose and will certainly include women. In the meantime, they define the change they have created as “adaptations” and not an updating of halacha. Furthermore, one of the interviewees went as far as to explain that as far as she is concerned, there is nothing modern in their style of prayer and another added that she feels that it is a parallel to the prayers common in Ulpanot, which represent the center of the religious Zionist stream and even the Torani (Chardali) stream.

At the practical level, we have seen that they avoid reciting Dvarim Shebikdusha and do not define themselves as a “minyan”. Along with this however, they read from the Torah scrolls and a large number of them recite the blessings, a practice which was not granted the approval of the more important poskim of the Orthodox stream.

If so, the Post-Orthodox flow, which is a matter of subjective identity and blurring, is what characterizes the manifestation of the prayer group, although its precise position regarding Orthodoxy remains unclear.

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1. See, for example, Mordechai Breuer, *Eda VeDyukana: Ortodoxia BaReich 1871-1918* [*A Group and its Portrait: Orthodoxy in the German Reich 1871-1918*](Mercaz Zalman Shazar: Jerusalem), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his personal introduction to the book [↑](#footnote-ref-2)