**Chapter 3: Narrative Backlash: Theological, Discursive and Political Orthodox Obstacles to Dati FeminisM**

In the previous chapter, we examined the relative successes of the feminist movement in shifting the Orthodox narrative and changing the *nomos* in the direction of greater equality for Orthodox women within multiple spheres and communal “homes.” In this chapter, we ask ourselves: What types of backlash are these changes creating? How are the trends towards greater participation and equality being met with rhetorical and theological claims aimed at undermining feminist claims?

Conservative religious groups, politicized religions[[1]](#endnote-1) and especially fundamentalist streams are often outspokenly antagonistic to feminism in the public sphere, treating women’s roles as the litmus test of orientation and ideology when drawing the group’s symbolic boundaries,[[2]](#endnote-2) yet this phenomenon is not unique to religious contexts. In her influential 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi noted a curious trend:[[3]](#endnote-3) Even as women have continued to suffer gender discrimination in a wide array of ways, as evidenced by a range of phenomena from health outcomes to the wage gap, they have been maligned as victims of the success of the feminist movement. Feminists have been accused of destroying the family and, in doing so, of harming women, who were portrayed as lonely victims of extended singledom by virtue of their career ambitions. Faludi uses the term “backlash” to describe this trend, whereby feminism is held to be responsible for perceived social ills stemming from equality, even though it has not succeeded in attaining said equality.[[4]](#endnote-4) She notes that the backlash against feminism was the product of

moral panic at its advances, which backlash is often led by women in the name of protecting women from feminism.[[5]](#endnote-5) Women are proclaimed both the victors, in the sense that alleging feminism is claimed to have achieved its goals, and victims, insofar as women are argued to suffer from the new order of gender equality: “Women are enslaved by their own liberation […] the women’s movement, as we are told time and time again, has proved women’s own worst enemy.”[[6]](#endnote-6) At the same time, Faludi claims, most women are in favor of the changes produced by the feminist movement and want more equality, not less.

The above backlash tries to subvert feminism’s meager and hard-won victories by claiming they disadvantage women: “It deploys both the ‘new findings’ of ‘scientific research’ and the dimestore moralism of yesteryear […]The backlash has succeeded in framing virtually the whole issue of women’s rights in its own language.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Yet, the cause of women’s unhappiness is not the feminist revolution but the attempts to halt that revolution, and with it the advances in women’s autonomy. By creating myths around women’s personal lives on subjects such as romance and fertility, the backlash aims to break women’s dedication to feminism and gender equality by portraying it as working against their own interests. The goal is thus to stop the revolution by stopping the people behind it. To that end, it divides women, creating a rift between feminist activists and laywomen as part of its “divide and conquer” tactic. Although misogyny is pervasive in Western culture, it ebbs and flows in correlation with historic events, with acute flare-ups in response to perceived progress in women’s rights. These flare-ups are the backlash – not a coordinated conspiracy but a diffuse reaction to feminist advances. Faludi notes that in America in the 80s and 90s, the backlash interfered with further advances in women’s advances exactly when they were on the cusp of some of their greatest accomplishments. Today, we are once again witnessing a backlash against feminism in many Western countries, accompanied in Europe by the rise of the conservative right and the general political backlash against liberal values.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This chapter does not enumerate the many structural obstacles hindering the religious feminist endeavor but focuses on the rise of opposing conservative narratives. Conservative reactions to gender critiques can be generally grouped into two main approaches: The first maintains that while the gendered hierarchy in Judaism might appear problematic to modern sensibilities, the problem is with their perspective and is not a moral problem with the tradition itself. Since it is God’s will, the hierarchy must be accepted as is. Moreover, accepting God’s will is a test of faith and religious commitment. The other approach is more apologetic: Its proponents accept the basic assumption that gender discrimination is a problem; however, they deny its existence in Judaism and reject any sort of correlation of feminine oppression with Judaism. This approach offers a picture of differentiated essentialist femininity along the lines of “different yet equal,” a formula familiar from the feminist literature, with some even going so far as to claim that women are considered superior in Judaism.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Beyond these basic reactions, we would like to draw attention to active theological discourses that serve as obstacles to the adoption of liberal trends in general and trends to increase gender equality in modern Orthodox society in particular. We argue that certain oppositional narratives are being espoused or are emerging in response to liberal narratives – such as those relating to autonomy, individualism, self-fulfillment, the rights discourse and gender equality – and are taking root in modern Orthodox society. We have identified five primary forms of narrative backlash, distinct but interrelated: “sacrifice,” “gender essentialism,” “the slippery slope,” “nationalism” and “normalcy”/“family values.” While feminism derives from the discourse of rights and demands the recognition of women as subjects and critiques the traditional Jewish narrative and *nomos*, conservative forces emphasize the idea of “sacrifice,” which challenges beliefs regarding personal autonomy and demands the subordination of human desire and ethics to the divine will. While feminism sees gender as a social construct, contemporary halakhic and theological writings promote an essentialist discourse. Even after feminists make a convincing case that some of their demands are legitimate possibilities within the bounds of halakhic norms, those demands may be rejected outright since any feminist challenge to the social order, however minor, may be perceived as a “slippery slope,” i.e. a threat, that could unmoor Orthodox society from its foundations and undermine its boundaries and distinction from liberal denominations. While religious feminism portrays its struggles as an ethical movement that aligns with the Zionist agenda of reestablishing the Jewish people in its homeland and the construction of a just Jewish State, conservative religiousforces view feminism as a threat to national identity, security and the cohesion of the national collective. This ties into the backlash against feminist challenges relating to the primacy of the family and its heteronormative and patriarchal structure and character.

We argue that these are broad obstacles, sometimes deep-seated and sometimes solely rhetorical, aimed not only at rejecting specific feminist claims but at delegitimizing feminists themselves. Their ultimate goal is justifying patriarchal norms and tightening the hold of conservative power holders and institutions. Such theological obstacles are not necessarily a direct response to the feminist critique; some existed in the religious narrative since its inception, while others are newer. Indeed, within this frequently changing narrative, various elements become more prominent, while others become less so and receive a corresponding expression in the *nomos*. The main point, therefore, is not how new they are but to what extent they are part of the rhetorical strategy of conservative-imperialist forces in their battle against gender changes. We claim that their popularity in current religious discourse acts primarily as a reactive attempt to block changes deriving from liberal trends in general and feminist trends in particular.

**The Sacrificial Imperative: “*Aqedah*” Theology as the Basis for Religious Subjectivity**

On the face of it, it would appear that the ultimate paradigm of any religious belief, when boiled down to its essentials, is “sacrifice.” Human beings accepting religious responsibility are required to subsume their wishes, desires, creations and ambitions to the divine will, and acceptance of that yoke defines the existence of a religious person, as in Abraham’s actions at the binding of Isaac. However, the idea of sacrifice itself does not necessarily imply that the believer must sacrifice their moral standards as well, as that question depends upon a more fundamental basic question concerning the extent of the reliance of morality on religion.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the following section, we will show how the idea of sacrifice, wherein the religious person is required to subjugate himself to the yoke of *halakhah* even when it does not meet their moral standards, has been gaining ground in the modern Orthodox community in recent years, as well as the gendered repercussions of this theological approach.[[11]](#endnote-11)

One of the foremost developers of sacrifice theology was Rav Soloveitchik, the *halakhic* thinker and one of the leaders of the modern Orthodox community in the US; he also had a marked influence in Israel. According to Soloveitchik, sacrifice is the foremost religious paradigm and the ultimate expression of what is demanded of man, since without enslavement to God, human beings cannot be free but instead are subjugated and enslaved by the circumstances of life. Self-improvement via *halakha* means overcoming natural desires, urges and sometimes even moral standards so that religious life ultimately entails self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is the ideal upon which the entirety of religious life is based and this transforms internal personal conflict into a constitutive paradigm. Rav Soloveitchik has argued explicitly that when there is a conflict between divine will and morality, divine will supersedes the moral code:

It is self-evident – many problems are unsolvable, you can’t help it. For instance, the problem of mamzerim [bastards] – […] you can’t help it. All we have it the Jewish *nachalah* [heritage] – no one can abandon it. […] It cannot be abandoned. […] What can we do? This is toras moshe [the Torah of Moses]; this is surrender; this is *kabalas ol malchus shamayim* [accepting the yoke of the divine rule]. We surrender. The Torah summons the Jew to live halachically. We cannot allow an *eishes ish* [married woman], no matter how tragic the case, to remarry without a get. […] Sometimes the cases are very tragic, as I know from my own experience.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Sacrificing the moral principle here is clear. The claim that sometimes there is no opportunity to free a woman from the chains of her marriage or change the forlorn fate of the bastard, which is not a sin or a crime, assumes that sometimes the moral principle must be sacrificed on the altar of *halakhah*.

Rav Soloveitchik’s students in Israel transformed the conflict between religious and

moral dictates into a litmus test for the believer’s religiosity. For example, Rav Haim

Navon, who claims to be greatly influenced by Rav Soloveitchik’s thinking, directly links sacrifice theology to the status of women. In his book, which addresses the question of the *halakhic* status of women, he presents the following general rule:

If we believe that the Torah was given to us from on High, we also believe that hidden within it is wisdom greater than our own. When Abraham trekked to the sacrifice, he knew he was going to take a step that contradicted all of his moral beliefs; but he also understood that Hashem knew better than he did what was truth and what was moral. In the continuation of our discussion, we will also discuss reservations regarding this decisive statement. However, this is the clear starting point of our discussion: We cannot impose our values on the Torah; we must adopt its values.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This interpretation of sacrifice explicitly includes the moral realm. Despite morality being perceived as autonomous, there will be instances in which the ethical dictate and the religious dictate will be in conflict. In such cases, it is self-evident that the divine dictate supersedes the ethical and it is incumbent upon the believer to obey the former. At the same time, it should be noted that *Aqedah* (sacrifice) theology, as laid out in modern Orthodox society, recognizes the autonomous status of morality and its non-reliance on divine dictate and therefore seeks to limit as much as possible the conflict between them. As the late Rav Lichtenstein, one of Rav Soloveitchik’s most senior students in Israel who headed one of the major religious Zionist *yeshivot* wrote:

A man of Israel must answer “Here I am” [...] but before brandishing the slaughtering knife he can and must confirm as best he can if indeed he was so commanded, is the morality unequivocal and is the clash of values so direct? If there is a need and place for interpretation – which must be determined – a sensitive and sagacious conscience is one of the factors that shape judgment.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The main problem with sacrifice theology arises, we believe, from its more stringent interpretation, common in the religious community, that does not accept the autonomy of morality and believes that divine dictate determines morality. In this case, there is effectively no conflict between the divine dictate and the moral dictate, since human moral standards are liable to be incorrect and distorted. Only divine dictate, as laid out in *halakhah*, shapes true moral standards. The accepted language game in this religious sector maintains that there is an infinite gap between divine morality and human morality, and therefore it behooves man to educate himself to subordinate his moral insights to his religious ones. In this case, it is obvious that moral insights that critique women’s status in the *halakhic* world are baseless; instead, the patriarchal world order must be accepted *a priori*, as the human brain cannot comprehend the level of morality embedded in this structure. For example, Rav Tau, one of the foremost proponents of this approach, writes in his interpretation of the Sacrifice of Isaac:

Abraham is “Abraham my Beloved,” a man of kindness, who calls out lovingly to God. This love, which reaches its height here, is not a human love of soft emotionality, but rather a love filled with courage, “strength as love,” courage greater than human courage that raises all of the human qualities to the level of one who desires God completely […] Abraham does not understand the divine intention behind the test but he recognizes and knows that desiring God is the ideal of ideals, the holy of holies, the pinnacle of life, and all of his longings and ambitions are aimed at fulfilling this desire, knowing that any human ideal is as nothing in comparison. Self-effacement before the source of all is the ultimate courage, and the pinnacle of the love that does not see physical or spiritual fulfillment, but rather desires the complete good because there is no other like it.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In the same vein, his wife, the late Rebbetzin Chana Tau, writes words of encouragement to the *kollel* wives:

You women sitting here. […] We are the heart of the world, we are the poles on which the Ark of the Covenant was carried. […] We carry the Ark. We are fortunate to have merited this task. […] You must not think that the Torah belongs only to your husbands […] We are fortunate that we are the wives of Torah scholars of the kind who do not pursue their own interests […] but are willing to sacrifice their entire lives to God’s will. […] In this situation, we women—with our role of strengthening and encouraging—cannot fathom what the men are doing when they sit in the study hall. It seems that our work is difficult, but to sit and concentrate on Torah from the crack of dawn until late at night is many times harder.[[16]](#endnote-16)

In other words, there is no way to undermine the morality of the patriarchal order according to which the men are the ones who learn Torah and continue to constitute and shape religious culture and Jewish *halakhah*, while the women raise the children. However, should women’s and perhaps men’s moral intuitions find this order difficult, it is possible to explain the vaunted role of women in the moral world order decreed by God. If there are women who have a problem with their primary, and perhaps only, roles as mothers and wives (and the fact that the author feels compelled to address the issue gives the impression that these feelings indeed exist and are not unfounded), it must be emphasized over and over that these feelings, whose origin is human, do not derive from a true moral source. It is easy to argue that when morality is not considered autonomous, in opposition to Rav Lichtenstein’s view, the interpretive motivation, if it exists at all, dies an angry death. Interpretive gaps are created only when the *halakhah* is juxtaposed with another source (e.g. the mind, morality) considered no less true. “Divine morality” therefore will always overcome human morality in a manner that will continue to support the view of the conservative order while stressing the inherent illegitimacy of any undermining of this social order.

We are of the opinion that this awareness of sacrifice is pervasive, and many religious communities consider it the ultimate religious stance. Anyone who finds themselves ambivalent or questioning is educated to see it as a failing, to perceive themselves as a “compromised” religious individual (dubbed “dati lite” in contemporary Israeli slang) who pits their own national and personal insights against what is considered an absolute and exalted *halakhic* obligation.

Nevertheless, there are other meta-halakhic values and principles from the Jewish narrative that overcome, or at least oppose, this idea of “sacrifice.” Many would never even conceive of not treating a wounded person on Shabbat because they have internalized the principle of the “pursuit of peace.” However, in the name of such religious principles, ideas and values like “the sanctity of life,” “the shadow of god” or “pursuing justice”, solitary rabbinic voices –– have issued a call to refrain from reducing a woman’s humanity.[[17]](#endnote-17) Our impression is that the consciousness of “sacrifice” is presented as the sole desirable form of religious awareness in the framework of anti-feminist rhetoric and is used to raise doubts, as we will see below, about the level of religious commitment of those who take “egotistical” feminist stands and ostensibly “sanctify” their own desires instead of subordinating themselves to the divine will. The fact that this idea of “sacrifice” constitutes an obstacle is emphasized even further on the basis of how some religious feminists attribute their critique to a moral approach derived from Judaism itself.[[18]](#endnote-18)

We will now demonstrate how the sacrifice model is used to undermine the foundations of the religious feminist project regarding women’s Torah learning. In doing so, we point primarily to how sacrifice theology forms a significant obstacle that seeks to educate from the outset in a “proper” religious philosophy. We will offer two examples. The first is a direct example of the connection between the rejection of religious feminism and the idea of the sacrifice; in the second instance, the connection is more hidden but, we argue, goes directly to the narrative level and seeks to direct the drama occurring within between paideic and imperial forces along more “desirable” paths.

For example, Rav Haim Navon, whose sacrifice theology we discussed above, writes: “I admit that I cannot manage to understand for example why the Torah says a woman cannot be a witness, but it is clear to me that if that is what the Torah says, then it is the truth and we must conduct our lives accordingly.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Later on, he continues:

Prof. Tamar Ross wrote an impressive book from a philosophical perspective about feminism and Judaism – *Expanding The Palace of Torah*. The main point of the book is an attempt to interpret and shape our familiarity with Judaism in light of feminist insights. There is no thought given to the possibility of the opposite process: to interpret and shape feminism in light of the Torah.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Navon ostensibly celebrates the entry of women theologians and scholars into theological and Torah discourses while demanding, so to speak, a “loyalty pledge”: a clear declaration in advance that will dictate the results of the interpretive process, subjugating feminist beliefs (considered external and secondary to religion and a result of personal preference) to the Torah and divine will (as he understands them). Sacrifice theology serves quite explicitly, therefore, as a tool to police potential *halakhic* and/or theological changes that may arise from a commitment to gender equality.

Rav Yuval Cherlow, who has emerged as one of the more visible leaders of modern Orthodoxy and frequently expresses sympathetic views to religious feminism, offers a gentler version of sacrifice theology. As opposed to other rabbis, Cherlow does not hesitate to touch upon widespread social and gender issues, standing with religious feminists in their attempts to expose violence and sexual assault in the religious community. In doing so, he has even paid a personal price, becoming tagged in some circles as “neo-Reform” and the like.[[21]](#endnote-21) Rav Cherlow cannot be called a “classic conservative” since he is committed to deep reflection on the place and image of *halakhah* in the context of our lives today. Nevertheless, and perhaps as a direct result, it is noticeable how central the rhetoric of “sacrifice” is in his writings and how he frames his recognition of the need for change.

The attempt to present the recognition that we must do only that which God commanded us to do as the sole criterion cannot completely prevent the mistake and the deviation.

Nevertheless, it appears that two basic principles can be derived from this general rule. The first is the very recognition and commitment to only do God’s will, and not man’s will when there is a conflict between these two desires. All those who consider halakhah a source of inspiration and not a source of authority; all those who relate to the faith of Israel as a spiritual experience, and do not recognize Mt. Sinai’s coercion as if it was a barrel held over his head; all those who ignore the sacrifice, and refuse to bring their desires and beliefs to God’s altar when it is clear to them that He so commanded; all those who seek to base their connection to their Maker in the melody of just father and son and are not ready to say “if as sons if as slaves” –

all of those are builders of calves and not builders of the Mishkan…[[22]](#endnote-22)

One can say, therefore, that the distinction between “*Mishkan*” (worshipping God) and “*the Calf*” (idol worship) is first and foremost a distinction between sacrificing man’s will in favor of divine will and rejecting this idea. However, this distinction can become blurred when put to the test. How does man know what the word of God is, and how will we know as external judges when the sacrifice rhetoric is a ploy and when it expresses an authentic religious stand?

To do so, Cherlow proposes an additional standard whose sole purpose is to indicate that the idea of sacrifice does indeed constitute a foundational, true and frank idea in the religious revival that seeks the status of “*Mishkan*.” While Rav Cherlow refrains from directing his remarks directly at religious feminism, however, given the fact that his book discusses standards that differentiate the desired religious revival (“*Mishkan*”) and the undesirable religious revival (“*Calf*”) and religious feminism is one of the main foci of spiritual fermentation and religious revival in the modern Orthodox community today, it is not too far-fetched to assume that his remarks are also directed – and perhaps primarily directed – at religious feminism.[[23]](#endnote-23) However, we have found no indication that Rav Cherlow necessarily believes that one must sacrifice ethical directives in favor of religious directives, as we saw in Rav Soloveitchik’s writings, and therefore it appears that he does not reject the feminist revolution out of hand. However, the criteria according to which he proposes to examine the validity of a religious reform still focus on the motivations and purity of intent of the revolution’s flag-bearers and thus raise suspicion as to the validity of the feminist revolution.

1. See Jeffery & Basu, 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Israel-Cohen, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Faludi Backlash Is this ref. correct? It reads oddly as it stands. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ref.missing. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. XII, XIII [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Is this a page ref? If so, it needs formatting consistently with rest of footnotes. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Krizsan, A. and Roggeband, C. (2018). Towards a conceptual framework for struggles over democracy in backsliding states: Gender equality policy in central Eastern Europe. *Politics and Governance,* .6(3),pp.90–100. DOI: 10.17645/pag.v6i3.1414., pp. 90, 91. NB I am not sure what these secondary page numbers are doing here (?). I would expect just a page range for the article you are citing.

   Grzebalska, W. and Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, pp.164–172.

   Hacker, D. (2013). Men’s groups as a new challenge to the Israeli feminist movement: lessons from the ongoing gender war over the tender years presumption. *Israel Studies*, 18(3), pp.29–40.

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9. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.makorrishon.co.il/culture/331675/ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For FN:

    Source of transcription: <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmud-torah-and.html>

    Original audio:

    <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767722/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_&_Mesorah_-_Part_1>

    and

    <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767723/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_&_Mesorah_-_Part_2cfm/767722/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_&_Mesorah_-_Part_1> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Tau 2009, pp. 9–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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22. REF [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. REF

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