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-2) Brown 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.[[2]](#footnote-3)

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 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?[[3]](#footnote-4)

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 notes that accepted Orthodox discourse does not regard tradition as a developing work in progress, but rather as one that has been signed and sealed.[[4]](#footnote-5) This explains the dichotomy that has 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 on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity through the complete rejection of modernistic features and rigid adherence 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.

The third tenet argues that Judaism as a religion inherently contains modernistic elements, and accordingly 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.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Libman (1982) addresses Israeli reality, suggesting that the Orthodox response to modernity is expressed in two main ways: neo-traditionalism and Modern Orthodoxy.[[6]](#footnote-7) 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 Religious Zionism, may be divided into three ideal types that espouse Jewish commitment to Halakha without rejecting the main cultural, social, or national values of the modern world. These types are as follows:

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

Compartmentalization – in this case, as with neo-traditionalism, there is a desire to preserve tradition untainted, but to reduce the spheres of life to which it is considered relevant. Simultaneously, the range of aspects of life considered neutral from a religious or Jewish point of view, and thus fair game for the influence of modernity, is expanded. The compartmentalization response is associated with the neo-Orthodox community, which emerged in Germany during the nineteenth century, and with which Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was associated.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Expansion and gaining control: This type accepts modernity in its renewed interpretation through the prism of Jewish tradition.

Each of its branches seeks to grant meaning to each of life’s components, in keeping with the specific interpretation given to it in Judaism. There is no absolute version of this type in existence and accordingly it overlaps to a degree 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 reinterpretation.[[8]](#footnote-9) In Israel, Geiger named this branch “the new religious Zionism” and suggested that it is characterized by the legitimacy it grants modernity as a formative force, alongside religious sources.[[9]](#footnote-10) This branch perceives the halakhic decision-making process as inherently sociocultural, and is willing to criticize the rabbinic authorities not only in areas which are not halakhic, but also regarding the Halakha itself. In terms of patterns of behavior, most religious liberals show an extreme openness to and participation in the non-religious environment, adopting secular patterns that in some cases conflict with halakhic norms as perceived by conservatives. They see no conflict between behaviors considered clearly “secular” and their own consciousness of themselves as religious.[[10]](#footnote-11)

The second branch, known as “nationalist Haredi,” objects to changes in Jewish tradition, as does the compartmentalization approach, but goes as far as to reject any division between the various areas of existence, espousing the sanctification of all areas of life and thus the idea of a sanctified state.[[11]](#footnote-12)

*What is Post-Orthodoxy?*

In the world of research and within Modern Orthodoxy itself, various attempts have been made to characterize and redefine Orthodoxy in order to allow it to include as many sub-streams as possible, as illustrated above. Prominent attempts include those of Gili Zivan and Aviezer Ravitzky, who sought to facilitate the creation of a cultural-community spectrum between Modern Orthodoxy and the initial concept of Orthodoxy; these attempts, however, have not been free of difficulties.[[12]](#footnote-13)

This attempt to unite communities has become increasingly difficult in Israel, due to a process that has emerged within Modern Orthodoxy itself and threatens its borders both internally and externally. In recent years, new religious discourse and trends have developed that breach the borders of the familiar definition of Modern Orthodoxy. Roznak (2006: 129) refers to this trend as Post-Modern Orthodoxy, or in short, Orthopost, alluding to its characteristic internalization of elements taken from the postmodern world and incorporated into the system of thought.[[13]](#footnote-14) Zivan explains that: “[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).

Notable figures who have contributed to this discourse include Rabbi Soloveichik, Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Rabbi Professor David Hartman, though one could also include some more radical characters in this list (Roznak: 138).

Orthopost is inherently pluralist and recognizes that its own position is merely one of a range of legitimate options. The sanctification of borderlines that is characteristic of Orthodox discourse does not form part of the Orthopost approach, which respects the identity choices of others.[[14]](#footnote-15)

As far as the hierarchy of *psika* (halakhic decision-making) is concerned, Orthopost adopts various patterns that differ from those found in any of the conventional variants of Orthodoxy, and does not seek authoritative teachers. Some rabbis who are regarded as inspirational received Orthodox *smicha* (ordination) but adhere to worldviews that differ from those of rabbis from the central stream. This leads to criticism of these rabbis as groundbreaking and close to Conservative Judaism, particularly in the matter of halakhic equality between the sexes. This reality reinforces sociological claims from recent years regarding the manner in which hybridity in religious practice has become a central theme in analyzing certain trends in religious metamorphosis.[[15]](#footnote-16)

The socially-constructed nature of social hybridity is reflected in its designation as something that overcomes the boundaries between things that were previously separated.[[16]](#footnote-17) In the case of the Jewish religious streams, it can indeed be argued that while the distinction between religious and secular, as well as between the various religious streams, was in the past completely isolationist, it is notable that these separations are nowhere near as clear-cut today as they once were.

The two aspects that are most prominent in terms of their importance to the argument of hybridity in conservative religions are the hierarchy of religious authority[[17]](#footnote-18) and boundaries with other streams. Israel-Cohen (2012) claims that traces of hybridity have become integrated into Modern Orthodox Judaism in Israel.[[18]](#footnote-19) She begins by noting the criticism directed toward the rabbinical authorities of the state from within Modern Orthodoxy, which in turn is leading to pluralization in halakhic decision-making. Cohen-Israel then expresses doubt regarding borders that were once taken as given, focusing within this context on the blurring of boundaries between Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism. In this context, she proposes the label “Conservadox.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Like other researchers, she addresses Post-Orthodoxy and posits the idea that the voices she examines in her research belong to this analytical group.[[20]](#footnote-21)

A crucial precondition for the hybrid religious identity is individual thought and a quest for deep experiences in all aspects of religious life (and other areas of life); this is one of the components most closely associated with Orthopost. The emphasis on prayer is rooted less in halakhic detail and more in the “connection” between the worshipper and the prayer experience. In keeping with this approach, frameworks have developed for new spiritual communities for whom the prayers have taken on a more Hasidic and esthetic bent, within the Orthodox community.[[21]](#footnote-22) The most prominent example of this development is the Breslov Hasidim.

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 up in the world of Modern Orthodox yeshivas; some have been ordained for the rabbinate and strictly observe the instruction to engage in broad-based daily learning. On the other hand, Zisser and Libman (2004) describe Orthopost as comprising those who left the Modern Orthodox community.[[22]](#footnote-23) Zisser proposes various characteristics for 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.[[23]](#footnote-25) “Being Post-Orthodox means being a Jew in a tight spot; too cynical to believe, to committed to leave…this is therefore the home of homeless Jews.”[[24]](#footnote-26) He suggests that the daily lives of those who adhere to Post-Orthodoxy take place for the most part within the secular world, in which they also raise their children. However, secularism does not serve as their true home. In his opinion, Post-Orthodox Jews “are on the fence,” given that they do not regard other streams of Judaism as a serious alternative.

The description of Post-Orthodoxy as presented above is based on research from the field of Judaism; it describes it as a global life-space in conflict with the Orthodox experience in many senses, and as one that shatters the terminology intended to classify and categorize Orthodox reality and to mark its symbolic limits. Sociological research, however, suggests 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.”[[25]](#footnote-27)

In effect, Post-Orthodoxy is not actually a stream within Judaism, and Leon accordingly uses the term “flow,” based on the anthropologist Appadurai and the interpretation given to this term by Ben Rafael (2007) in the Jewish context. He examines the “Post-Orthodox flow” in Israeli Judaism, focusing 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. […]

[N]evertheless, 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.[[26]](#footnote-28)

*Orthodoxy, Feminism, and What Lies Between Them*

Beyond the halakhic issues, one of the central symbols separating Orthodoxy from other streams is the involvement of women in the public space of religious life. Referring to the harmonization response of Modern Orthodoxy, Hartman notes that as a movement that incorporates modernity, it is also open to the idea of feminism, though feminist demands threaten to destabilize the ground upon which the patriarchal structure is built. Accordingly, feminism is regarded as a framework that cannot be reconciled with the Torah and with traditional life, and represents one of the bodies of knowledge and values that are hardest for the religious world to digest.[[27]](#footnote-29)

With the integration of women into the public sphere, opposition began to emerge among religious women (beginning in the 1970s in the United States and the 1990s in Israel) regarding the lack of gender equality in the Orthodox community.[[28]](#footnote-30) In the United States, the religious-feminist struggle grew out of women’s desire for equality in religious practice, whose center and core lay in the synagogue. In Israel, on the other hand, the struggle for equality focused more on the equal opportunity to learn Torah.[[29]](#footnote-31) Despite these differences in context and emphasis, the common ground of Orthodox feminism’s fight, in contrast to the non-Orthodox streams, lay in the desire to bring about change within the boundaries of Orthodox Halakha which, as noted , is considerably less open to change, if at all.[[30]](#footnote-32)

Israel-Cohen regards Orthodox feminism as a hybrid category within which certain varieties overlap with Post-Orthodoxy.[[31]](#footnote-33) She examines the views of feminist activists concerning questions of religious authority and ties between the various streams. Her findings lead her to the conclusion that the perspectives of her subjects reflect a new pattern of thought within Orthodoxy and the development of a hybrid religious identity that remains tied to the status of women but extends beyond gender dynamics. Those surveyed suggest that Orthodoxy needs to introduce a more pluralist system of religious authority and to grant greater legitimacy to individual perspectives within the framework of the Halakha.

Yannai-Ventura also seeks to read the dynamic of religious-feminist identity as a hybrid process. She argues that we should not perceive the process as a series of adaptations between religion and feminism, nor as the breaching of the categories of feminism and religion. She proposes the term “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.”[[32]](#footnote-34)

The above critics do not accept the argument that this movement has moved outside the bounds of Orthodoxy. Israel-Cohen takes this stance based on a series of reasons, including the fact that this type of claim contradicts the position of the women themselves, who regard Orthodoxy as their home despite the deep tensions. Moreover, this argument conflates Orthodoxy with the forces moving toward fundamentalism within Orthodox society, while ignoring those voices that are encouraging Orthodoxy to consider increased pluralism. In addition, the hybridity reflected in the research could be one way to allow the religion to change over time and to retain its relevancy.[[33]](#footnote-35)

Like Israel-Cohen, Roznak also links Orthodox feminism and Post-Orthodoxy on the level of ideas, proposing the label “Orthopost feminism” for many of the phenomena that have emerged from Orthodox feminism, such as mixed batei midrash, women’s minyanim, women reciting Kaddish in synagogue, and so forth.[[34]](#footnote-36)

One of the manifestations of religious feminism that has recently gained strength and prominence is women’s prayer. This does not refer to prayers led by women in egalitarian minyanim or to the reciting of Kaddish in mixed minyanim, but rather to a deeper change that seeks out the female voice and nuance in prayer. Moderate versions of this search may mandate a change from the first person male to the female (as for example in the “Modeh Ani” prayer); one of those leading this change is Professor Tamar Ross.[[35]](#footnote-37) Other versions may propose more significant changes.

Leon gives the example of the book “Women’s Prayer” by Aliza Lavi as an example of the “Post-Orthodox flow.”[[36]](#footnote-38) Lavi’s book contains prayers written by and for Jewish women during different periods and in various geographical locations. Most of the prayers take the form of requests and supplications from different parts of the annual cycle and the cycle of life, while a smaller number are liturgical poems (*piyyutim*). Leon argues that Lavi’s book serves 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.[[37]](#footnote-39)

As the above review shows, Post-Orthodoxy is not a phenomenon that can be readily characterized; neither is it easy to either associate or refute an association with any particular stream of Judaism. To a large degree, it could be said that the characteristics associated with this stream share considerable common ground with the liberal religious branch (Libman) of Modern Orthodoxy. However, one could equally easily point to shared patterns with other streams. This claim also applies to the various manifestations of Orthodox feminism. Some researchers see the individuals who adopt it as part of their Orthodox existence; others portray these individuals as having left Orthodoxy; and yet others emphasize the diverse backgrounds from which the individuals have come.

**Women’s Prayers**

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

Zimmer mentions a debate in the Jerusalem Talmud regarding a city of priests (Cohanim), where once they had given the priestly blessing during the repetition of the Amida prayer, women and children would answer amen. Since during the Talmudic period the priests gave their blessing every day, he extrapolates from this comment that women were present on a regular basis in the synagogue.[[38]](#footnote-40)

In the book *Sefer Hasidim* from the Middle Ages, the story is told of a woman who prayed Shaharit each day of the week in the synagogue. When on one occasion she walked out before the congregation had finished prayers, her husband rebuked her for leaving early: “You sinned by leaving the synagogue early!”[[39]](#footnote-41)

The Jews of Italy were noteworthy among the Jewish communities of the Middle Ages in this context, due to the significant place of women in the public religious domain. Adelman explains that in sixteenth-century, Verona women fought over the order of seating in the synagogue, until eventually the seats were permanently allocated according to the woman’s personal status. These women knew how to pray and even composed a significant number of prayers of their own, many of which are included in Aliza Lavi’s book.[[40]](#footnote-42)

In the 1730 Jerusalem Takanot (regulations), women were forbidden to stay for the final Kaddish in each of the three prayers in order to avoid the men looking at them. Again, this source shows that women were present in all these services.[[41]](#footnote-43)

Nevertheless, in nearly all of the cases that mention women’s participation in prayers in the synagogue, the women in question were seated in the women’s section (*Ezrat Nashim*) and participated in prayers led by men.

It is interesting to note that in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, in addition to the women’s section, there were rooms that served as synagogues in which women gathered for prayer and supplications, and which were run by *ba’alot tefila* (women prayer leaders).[[42]](#footnote-44) The male world had no objection to this phenomenon, just 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 it certainly did not contain any “problematic” sections, such as the repetition of the Amida or Torah reading from the scroll.[[43]](#footnote-45)

As mentioned, in the United States and in Israel the modern era has led to the flourishing of egalitarian congregations and minyanim. In Israel, however, there is a unique example of a group of women who formed a congregation, in all senses of the term, that holds services every Shabbat, parallel to those run by men. 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 Simhat Torah fifteen years ago, when a new member of the community 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, the group used the community’s local information sheet to invite women to services, as well as “marketing” it door-to-door. The founder identified with the plight of young mothers who had to walk a fair distance in order to pray and understood their need to do so. In practice, even women who lived far away came to her home.

Four years later, the women received permission to pray in the nursery at the local community center, and as the group expanded, they moved into a caravan belonging to the local authority. In terms of their official status, the women constitute a group within the community, but for practical reasons they are not recognized as an association.

Each Shabbat, the group gathers and conducts prayers (Maariv, Shaharit, and the Musaf supplementary service) at the same time as the standard service in the men’s section. The only difference is that the women refrain from reciting the *Dvarim she-bi-kdusha* (“Matters of Holiness”) components of the service, which tradition requires be recited only when a quorum of ten men is present.

The prayers generally follow the Nusah Sefarad standard, though each of the cantors introduces some of her own elements, such as a traditional Italian tune for the Shabbat *Shir shel Yom* (Hymn for the Day). Generally, the women do not include prayers written by women over the generations. However, before holidays, they compose texts of their own. For example, before Shavuot or Purim, they write a new Megilla, though the original text is the one used during services. Occasionally, voices emerge requesting innovation within the service, but most of the women prefer to adhere to the traditional form of the service and attach great importance to remaining faithful to the old, familiar style.

In contrast with many Modern Orthodox minyanim that hold a separate children’s minyan including the more important prayers and the weekly Torah portion, the Neve Daniel group holds no such service. This is not due to any lack of legitimacy regarding the presence of children, but rather the opposite. The children have a play corner within the space where the women pray, and are not scolded, even when their games are noisy.

Following the Torah reading, there is a conversation on the weekly Torah portion (*parashat ha-Shavua*). This is not a sermon given by one of the women, but rather an open, democratic debate led by each of the women 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.

When women are called to read from the Torah, and in keeping with tradition, a woman who was saved from some kind of danger recites the *ha-Gomel* blessing, after sharing the story of what she is thankful for with the other women.

Given that this is a congregation that accompanies women throughout the entire life cycle, when one of them celebrates the bar or bat mitzvah of their child, a number of precedents have emerged for marking the occasion. Some families choose to celebrate their child’s bar or bat mitzvah in a regular synagogue, in order to include 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. In many of these 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, recited by a woman. In the case of a bat mitzvah, the men hear the reading from behind a curtain. At the end of the service there is a “kiddush” where each member of the congregation brings one of her homemade offerings. This ensures uniformity in the format of the kiddush and discourages competition. Kiddushim are held at other moments in the women’s lives, such as when a son or daughter is drafted into the IDF.

Reactions to the prayer group have always varied, and even today there are those who refer to the women disparagingly as “Reform.” Nonetheless, there is no doubt that from the moment that the group began to contact key figures outside the community (the head of the religious council and the head of the local authority), the level of fear about the group fell significantly. Most of the women’s partners show full understanding and support the women’s group. Nevertheless, some women attend their partner’s synagogue during holidays, in order to avoid conflict.

The women’s group also meets on weekdays to address a range of halakhic issues as well as more practical matters. Issues arising through external relations with those around them (the administrative and religious management of Neve Daniel) have raised various questions: How much should they invest in the group’s visibility? Which building would be most suitable for their services? What help are they eligible for? Decisions are made by majority rule.

At present, the group’s relations with the local authority are not tense, and are indeed quite positive. However, the authority is not willing, at present, to issue an official document granting legitimacy to the women’s group. Accordingly, the group has decided to open a Facebook page in order to raise funds to renovate its building and to involve women in the ceremonies and the experience.

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

As we try to characterize this prayer group, we will address analytical categories such as hybrid religious identity and post-Orthodoxy that are largely conflated in the context of religious feminism.

As noted above, a precondition for the hybrid religious identity is individual thought, and consequently the search for a deeper experience in all areas of religious life. This is 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 halakhic practice. In effect, they serve, through their actions, as the antithesis to the “herd” phenomenon which characterize human groups as a whole and the residents of small and intimate communities such as Neve Daniel in particular. The constant democratic debates by the women, determined that “G-d should hear our voices” in a manner that is correct for each woman and for the group as a whole, serve as a precondition for hybridity. Even today, some fifteen years after the founding of the group, the women continue to raise questions 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. In a discussion arranged in a pair format, each woman expressed to her partner what she loved in the Torah, which parts were difficult for her, and what was the bridge that she sought.

As mentioned above, two areas that stand out in the hybrid thinking process of conservative religions are 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 also characteristic of Orthopost. As in other areas, this stream and insofar as everything related to the hierarchy of religious decision making and the manner of its practice, it adopts patterns that 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 group’s clear policy in all halakhic issues is to not request a ruling from a rabbi. The main reason for this is that some of the women in the group have undertaken advanced Torah and halakhic studies at some of Religious Zionism’s most prestigious institutions, while others have learned alone. They know how to seek out the relevant sources and to grant each consideration or source the weight it deserves when arriving at a decision. A further reason for this policy is their desire to avoid creating a political issue among rabbis. On rare occasions, one of the women may present a specific question to a rabbi who is acceptable to her, for the purpose of consultation alone.

Moreover, when dealing with significant halakhic matters the usual decision is not to decide. The only significant halakhic decision accepted from the outset, as noted above, was to avoid reciting the sections known as *Dvarim she-bi-Kdusha* (this term will be discussed in greater detail below).

In any case, even when a decision is taken, this occurs by consensus and not through majority decisions, since the social makeup of the group is highly diverse and there is a desire to ensure that all the members feel comfortable with decisions. This essentially creates a basic common ground reflecting the concessions that have been 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 recite the blessings on the Torah when they are called up to read, while others choose not to do so.

The actions described above certainly represent an approach that differs from the traditional view of the hierarchy of authority in two ways; first, by making rabbinical decision irrelevant to the congregation, and secondly, by leaving the various halakhic issues unresolved, while creating differences within the management. Neither of these viewpoints is characteristic of traditional Orthodox minyanim.

Questioning halakhic authority, in this context, also changes validity, given that Neve Daniel is a small and intimate community with regulations stating that the rabbi is the community’s spiritual leader. The moment that the women’s group refused to accept his decisions, they were no longer allowed space in the community information sheet. They are, however, careful not to mention the rabbi in their meetings.

The second field which stands out in the hybridity of conservative religions is a blurring of the boundaries 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 immediately raises associations with Conservative and Reform Judaism, in which services led by women are a prominent feature. On the other hand, the very fact of separation from the men in order not to violate halakhic decisions of the central stream of Orthodoxy regarding the definition of a minyan (for the purpose of reciting *Dvarim she-bi-kdusha* and the gender of the prayer leader) whose role is to help the congregation fulfill their duties, act as a means of adhering to the central stream of Orthodoxy and refraining from overstretching the boundaries. This approach contrasts with that of egalitarian minyanim, the majority of which have women reading from the Torah and acting as prayer leaders during Maariv, with some doing so throughout the services and reciting all the prayers (the Klausner congregation in Jerusalem is an example of this). We should note that in the majority of these minyanim, the members define themselves as Orthodox, grounding the changes they have implemented on their interpretations of halakhic sources.

The women of the group do not recite the *Dvarim she-bi-Kdusha* (the Kaddish prayer, the *Barchu* invocation, the prayer-leader’s repetition of the Amida, the priestly blessing, and the Torah blessings). However, in order to not shorten the service and remove significant sections in terms of content and text, they do not omit the prayer leader’s repetition of the Amida altogether; on Shabbat they recite sections of the repetition without a blessing, while on the High Holy days the prayer leader recites the entire repetition without a blessing.

The only exception in the context of the *Dvarim she-bi-Kdusha* is the Torah reading. In the past, some of the women in the congregation were opposed to reading from the Torah scrolls, based on a decision by the community rabbi. Accordingly, it was decided 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, though not every Shabbat. When they read from the scrolls, most of the women in the congregation recite the Torah blessings in full, but those who are uncomfortable with this recite a version that does not end with a blessing – in other words, that omits the name of G-d. In addition, during the Torah reading, the “*Mi she-Berach*” prayer honoring those who read from the Torah is recited with a slight alteration, changing the mention of forefathers to mothers, and with no blessing.

In his article, Rabbi Aryeh Avraham Frumer mentions three methods for including women in a minyan.[[44]](#footnote-46) According to the first method, this will be permitted in cases in which women bear the same religious obligation as men, such as reading the Megilla. Thus, although women are obligated for individual prayer, they are exempted from public prayer and thus 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 rejects women’s participation in a minyan in any context (based on tractate Berakhot in the Talmud; other sources also support this view). The rationale behind this position is argument that since women are not eligible to complete a minyan, they are similarly unable to participate in Torah reading even in cases when they too are obligated. According to this approach, the decision is not based on the women’s level of obligation, but rather on their permanent status as individuals who cannot join a minyan for the purpose of sanctifying G-d’s name.

In fact, however, the greatest of the *Aharonim* (the Latter Sages) decreed that women may join a minyan for the purpose of publication, such as for the Megilla reading. A debate remains regarding women joining the *Minyan She-bi-kdusha*, 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 sanctifying G-d’s name is possible only according to the first approach. It should be noted that there are rabbis who were ordained by the Orthodox establishment, and who define themselves as Orthodox, and who do not see any intrinsic halakhic issue with women reading in a women’s minyan. Regarding the identity of the prayer leader, the general rule is “anyone who is not obligated cannot fulfill the obligation for others” (Mishna Rosh Hashana, 3:8), while those who are obligated are able to fulfill the obligation for others. This principle is implemented in several cases, including the blowing of the shofar, Grace after Meals, and reading the Megilla, where a comparison is drawn between the person obligated and the one fulfilling the obligation for others (Tos. Brachot, 5:14-17; Tos, Megilla, 2:7-8). However, there is no definitive decision regarding the prayer leader’s repetition of the Amida.

As already noted, Orthopost’s position is a pluralist one, and sanctification of the boundaries of the Orthodox discourse does not form part of its worldview.[[45]](#footnote-47) In keeping with this finding, the interviews with the women of the group show that they do not spend time on definitions and self-identification with any particular stream; neither are they interested in the definitions applied to them by their surroundings in this context. Indeed, they believe that there is no objective way to determine whether a particular 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 rather than 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 a process of identity creation that is not reliant upon the feminism/religion dichotomy and which does not require artificial mediation or division between the religious and the feminist spheres.

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

The discussion presented thus far confirms the women’s group affiliation to the Post-Orthodoxy trend. The question that arises is what is the precise nature of this affiliation? Is the group they belong to part of the trend that grew out of Modern Orthodoxy and crossed its boundaries? Can the trend it represents be positioned on the line between Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism, or is this an instance of a phenomenon that is occurring within Modern Orthodoxy?

First, as emerged from the survey of the literature, there is no agreement regarding an objective “acid test” that can provide a binary answer in each case as to whether a phenomenon meets the definition of “Orthodox.” Furthermore, Post-Orthodoxy is not an institutionalized stream of Judaism. Accordingly, 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. Self-defined, and thus subjective, identity determines the essence here, since the definitions are not unequivocal or divisive, as we saw above. The women define themselves as Orthodox and consider themselves obligated by Halakha, 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 noted, Israel-Cohen and Yannai-Ventura do not accept the argument that this is a movement that is leaving Orthodoxy. Indeed, according to Israel-Cohen, the hybridity reflected in the research may be a way to permit religion to change with the times while remaining relevant.

The women of the prayer group view Halakha as a process. Their forecast for the future (whether near or distant) is that the halakhic definitions of Orthodoxy, including the definition of a minyan, will metamorphose and will certainly include women. In the meantime, they define the changes they have created as an “adaptation,” rather than an updating, of Halakha. 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. Another added that she feels that it is a parallel to the prayers common in Ulpanot, which lies within the mainstream of Religious-Zionism, and even in the more rigorous “*Hardali*” or Haredi-National stream.

On the practical level, we have seen that the women refrain from reciting the *Dvarim she-bi-kdusha* and do not define themselves as a “minyan.” At the same time, they read from the Torah scrolls and many of them recite the blessings, a practice that has not been approved by the more important arbiters of the Orthodox stream.

Thus the Post-Orthodox flow, with its focus on subjective identity and blurring, characterizes the this prayer group, although its precise position regarding Orthodoxy remains unclear.

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3. Aviezer Ravitzky, “Mavo: Al Gvulot ha-Ortodoxia”[Introduction: On the Limits of Orthodoxy] in *Ortodoxia Yehudit: Hebetim Hadashim* [Jewish Orthodoxy: New Aspects], edited by Y. Shalmon, Aviezer Ravitzky, and E. Prezinger (Jerusalem, 5766=2006), pp. 1-20 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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5. A. Sagi, “Ha-Ortodoxia ke-Va’aya,” p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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7. Ibid., pp. 232-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. A. Cohen, “Ha-Kipa ha-Sruga u-Ma she-me-Ahorav: Ribuy Zehuyot ba-Tzionut ha-Datit” [The Crocheted Kippa and What Lies behind It: Multiple Identities in Religious Zionism], *Akdamot*, vol. 15 (5765- 2005), pp. 6-30, at p. 19 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Y. Geiger, “Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit he-Hadasha” [The New Religious Zionism], *Akdamot*, vol. 11 (5762-2002), pp. 51-77, at pp. 51-52 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Y. Sheleg, *Ha-Datiyim Ha-Hadashim: Mabat Akhshavi al ha-Hevra ha-Datit be-Yisrael* [The New Religious: A Contemporary View of Religious Society in Israel] (Jerusalem, 2000) [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Y. Libman, “Hitpatchut.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See: Gili Zivan, “Hagut Yehudit Ortodoxit Nokhah Olam Post-Moderni: Nisyonot Hitmodedut Rishonim” [Orthodox Jewish Thought in a Postmodern World: Initial Attempts at Managing], thesis submitted for Ph.D., Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan, 5761-2001), pp. 89-90 [Hebrew]; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Herut al ha-Luhot: Kolot Aherim shel ha-Mahshava ha-Datit* [Freedom on the Tablets: Other Voices of Religious Thought] (Tel Aviv, 5759-1999) [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. A. Roznak, “Gvuliut u-Stiya ba-Ortodoxia: Psika Conservativit ve-Ortodoxia Post-Modernit” [Marginality and Deviation in Orthodoxy: Conservative and Orthodox Postmodern Psika), in *Ortodoxia Yehudit*, ed. Y. Shalmon et al., pp. 113-178, at p. 129 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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21. A. Roznak, “Gvuliut,” p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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24. B. Zisser and Y. Libman, *Livhor*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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