**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 towards 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 of feminism in the public sphere and treat 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 continued to suffer gender discrimination in a wide array of fields, from health outcomes to the wage gap, they were being maligned as victims of the success of the feminist movement. Feminists were accused of destroying the family and, by doing so, of harming women. Women were being portrayed as lonely victims of extended singledom by virtue of their career ambitions. She used the term "backlash" to describe this trend, where 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) Falludi notes that the backlash to feminism was the product of a moral panic at its advances. This backlash is often led by women, in the name of protecting women from feminism.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the backlash, women are proclaimed both the victors, alleging feminism has acheived its goals, and victims, arguing women 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) Yet, Faludi claims, most women are in favor of the changes produced by the feminist movement and want more equality, not less.

The 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 around 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 to stop the revolution by stopping the people behind it. Towards that end, it divides women, creating a rift between the feminist activists and lay women, 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 on women’s rights. These flare ups are the backlash – not a coordinated conspiracy, but a diffuse reaction to feminist advances. She notes that in America in the 80s and 90s, the backlash interfered with further advances in women’s advances exactly as they were out of the cusp of some of their greatest accomplishments. Today, once again, we are seeing a backlash against feminism in many Western countries. In Europe, this backlash comes with 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 those of modern sensibilities, the problem is with their perspective and is not a moral problem with the tradition itself. Since this 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 in nature: Its proponents accept the basic assumption that gender discrimination is a problem, however they deny its existence in Judaism, and reject any sort of identification 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 certain oppositional narrative discourses are being espoused or emerging in response to liberal narratives – such as autonomy, individualism, self fulfillment and the rights discourse, and gender equality – 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” or “family values”. While feminism derives from the rights discourse, demands the recognition of women as subjects, and critiques the traditional Jewish narrative and nomos, conservative forces emphasize the idea of the “sacrifice”, which challenges beliefs regarding personal autonomy and demands the subordination of human desire and ethics to Divine will. While feminism sees gender as a social construct, contemporary halakhic and theological writings promote an essentialist discourse. Even after feminists make convinicing cases that some of their demands are legitimate possibilities within the bounds of Halakhic norms, they may be rejected outright since any feminist challenge posed to the social order, however minor, may be perceived as a “slippery slope” - i.e., 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 religious forces view feminism as a threat to national identity, security and the cohesion of the national collective. This ties into the backlash to feminist challenges relating to the primacy of the family and its heteronormative and patriarchal structure and character.

We argue 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. The 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 the frequently changing narrative there are various elements which become more prominent and some which become less and receive a correspondingly strong 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 their popularity in the current religious discourse acts primarily as a reactive attempt to block changes deriving from liberal trends in general and feminist trends in particular.

**Sacrificial Imperative (“*Akedah”* Theology as 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 a Divine will, and acceptance of that yoke defines the existence of a religious person, like Abraham’s actions at the Sacrifice of Isaac. However, the idea of sacrifice itself does not necessarily assume that the believer must sacrifice their moral standards as well, as the issue is conditioned upon a more fundamental basic question of 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 *Halakha* 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)

Rav Soloveitchik, the *Halakhic* thinker and one of the leaders of the modern Orthodox community in the US whose influence was also marked in Israel, was one of the foremost developers of Sacrifice Theology. According to Rav Soloveitchik, sacrifice is the foremost religious paradigm and the ultimate expression of the sacrifice demanded of man, since without enslavement to God, human beings cannot be free but instead are subjugated and enslaved by life’s circumstances. Self-improvement via *Halakha* means overcoming natural desires, urges, and sometimes even moral standards, and therefore, religious life entails self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is the ideal according to which one bases the entirety of religious life, and therefore it transforms internal personal conflict into a constitutive paradigm. Rav Soloveitchik argued explicitly that when there is a conflict between divine will and morality, divine will trumps 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 *Halakha*.

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 has said himself he was 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, and in these instances, it is self-evident that divine dictate supersedes the ethical and it is incumbent upon the believer to obey the divine dictate.

 At the same time, it should be noted that *Akedah* (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 focus of conflict between them. As the late Rav Lichtenstein, one of Rav Soloveitchik’s most senior students in Israel who founded and 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)

Therefore, the main problem with sacrifice theology arises, we believe, from its more stringent interpretation, common in the religious community, which does not accept the autonomy of morality and believes that divine dictate determines morality. In this case, there is effectively no conflict between divine dictate and moral dictate, since human moral standards are liable to be incorrect and distorted. Only divine dictate, as laid out in *Halakha*, shape 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 Tao, 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 place to undermine the morality of the patriarchal order according to which the men are the ones who sit and learn Torah and continue to constitute and shape religious culture and Jewish *Halakha* while the women raise the children. However, should women’s and maybe men’s moral intuitions wonder at it, there is a place for explaining 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 she feels compelled to address the issue gives the impression that these feelings indeed exist and are not unfounded), then it must be repeated and emphasized that these feelings, by virtue of being human, do not derive from a true moral source. It is easy to argue that when morality is not considered autonomous, as opposed to Rav Lichtenstein’s view, the interpretive motivation, if it exists at all, dies an angry death. Interpretive gaps are created only when the *halakha* is juxtaposed to another source (the mind, morality) considered no less true. “Divine morality” therefore will always trump human morality in a manner that will continue to support the conservative order while stressing the inherent illegitimacy of any undermining of this social order.

We are of the opinion that this sacrifice awareness is pervasive, and many religious communities consider it the ultimate religious stance. Anyone who finds themselves ambivalent and questioning is educated to see it as a failing, to perceive themselves as a “compromise” religious person (and will be 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 trump, or at least oppose, the idea of the “sacrifice.” Indeed, many would never even conceive of not treating a wounded person on Shabbat because they have internalized the principle of “pursuit of peace.” However, there have been solitary rabbinic voices calling to refrain from - in the name of religious principles and values such as “the sanctity of life” the idea of “in the shadow of god” or the principle of “pursuing justice” - reducing a woman’s humanity.[[17]](#endnote-17) Our impression is that the “sacrifice” awareness is presented as the sole desirable 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, who sanctify, ostensibly, themselves and their desires instead of subordinating themselves to divine will. The fact that the idea of the “sacrifice” constitutes an obstacle is emphasized even more in light of the fact that 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 womens’ Torah learning. We point primarily to how the “sacrifice” theology forms a significant obstacle that seeks to educate from the outset to a “proper” religious philosophy. We will offer two examples: the first is a direct example of the connection between rejecting religious feminism and the idea of the sacrifice; while 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 from within between paideic and imperial forces towards 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)

And later on he writes,

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 theologists and scholars to the theological and Torah discourses, yet he demands a “loyalty pledge” if you will, a clear declaration in advance that will dictate the results of the interpretive process - subjugating feminist beliefs (which are 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 in the spirit of gender equality.

Rav Sherlo, who is emerging 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, Sherlo does not hesitate to touch upon widespread social and gendered issues, and stands with religious feminists in their activities to reveal violence and sexual assault in the religious community. He even pays a personal price for doing so, when he gets tagged as a “neo-Reform” and the like.[[21]](#endnote-21) Likewise, Rav Sherlo cannot be called a “classic conservative” since he is interested in deep reflection on the place and image of *Halakha* in the context of our lives today. Yet, and perhaps as a direct result, notice how central the rhetoric of the “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 Halakha 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 could be too 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, Sherlo 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 Sherlo refrains from directing his remarks directly at religious feminism, however, given the fact that his book discusses standards that differentiate between the desired religious revival, “*Mishkan*” and the undesirable religious revival “*Calf*”, and, given the fact that religious feminism is one of the main foci of spiritual fermentation and religious revival in the modern Orthodox community today, it would appear that it is not too farfetched to assume that his remarks are also directed - and perhaps primarily directed - at religious feminism.[[23]](#endnote-23) However, we note, that we found no indication that Rav Sherlo 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 he proposes to examine the “*kashrut*” of a religious reform still focus on the motivations and the purity of intent of the revolution’s flag bearers and thus raises a suspicion as to the “kosherness” of the feminist revolution.

1. (see Jeffery & Basu, 1998) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (Israel-Cohen, 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Faludi Backlash [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (X, XI) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (XII, XIII) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (2) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. (10) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)2018, Volume 6, Issue 3, Pages 90–100DOI: 10.17645/pag.v6i3.1414Article: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Struggles over Democracy in Backsliding States: Gender Equality Policy in Central Eastern Europe by Andrea Krizsan and Conny Roggeband, pgs 90, 91) Weronika Grzebalska, Andrea Pető, 2018. “The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland”, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68: 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767722/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_%26_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](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767723/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_%26_Mesorah_-_Part_2cfm/767722/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Gerus_%26_Mesorah_-_Part_1) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. (Tau 2009, 9-14) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. (REF) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)