

## FRUM SURFING: ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN'S INTERNET FORUMS AS A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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### Introduction:

In the autumn of 2007, while browsing through an Internet forum, I encountered a thread with a poll that caught my eye. Under a heading of intimate topics, a member had posted: "Are you attracted to your husband's private parts?" Asking whether other women found it difficult to touch their husband's genitals, she wondered whether her response was normal, and ended her post with a personal request to the site's moderator. What drew me to the poll was its phrasing which used the correct anatomical term and not "private parts," its appearance on an Internet forum open solely to married Orthodox Jewish women, and the poster's plea to the site moderator not to lock the thread.

Over the next several days an extensive debate developed on the site regarding this thread, with the vast majority of posters referring solely to the poll's wording, which included the biological term and not the common Orthodox-Jewish euphemism for the male organ. The original poster was exhorted to clean up her language; posters shared personal experiences of what they taught their children to call various body parts, and cited Orthodox rabbinical authorities about using these terms. After several weeks of virtual battling the moderator removed the poll, changed the question's wording to placate the religious sensibilities of site members, de-listed a member whose religious zeal and agenda were deemed unsuitable to the particular site, and deleted over 60 percent of the posts on the thread. The title of the denuded thread now read "attraction to husbands..." and only by going into the thread could new members understand what it was all about. The moderator also altered the guidelines of the intimacy section, telling posters they were allowed to use all proper English and Hebrew terms when discussing "private areas" but exhorting them to keep the general content of the message "clean and appropriate."

The debate over the aforementioned post and the creation and maintenance of virtual Orthodox Jewish women's (henceforth cited as OJW) forums appear to be indicative of a long existing need now receiving expression in

cyberspace. In this article I posit that we can learn much about the changing lives and cultures of Orthodox and Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish women today by examining the growing numbers of all-woman Internet forums created solely for, or frequented primarily, by OJW. In view of the ongoing debates among gender scholars about the importance of developing identity, or the “self”<sup>1</sup>, I claim that we can also use these forums to better explore and analyze some of the directions in which the Orthodox Jewish female “self” has been developing. While dozens of topics appear on these forums, here I will examine one broad subject that plays a major role on almost all of them due to its centrality in the lives of married OJW in their 20s, 30s and 40s (the most active age groups on these forums) – the “Physical Self.” Further discussion of the numerous issues connected to and appearing in OJW Internet forums will appear in my book-length study now being prepared. The present article is a prolegomena to this extensive future study.

### Research Framework

In order to locate the topic within its broader framework and explain some of the salient terms used in the article, let me first address the “five Ws” which act as coordinates for this study:

**Who – Who** are our subjects? The study deals with Orthodox, known colloquially as “frum”<sup>2</sup> (devout, pious) Jewish women committed to a relatively strict interpretation and application of belief in the laws of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> As Orthodox Jews, they live their public and private lives within the framework of a system known as *halacha*, strict Jewish law as formulated in the *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>4</sup> and its commentaries, and based on written and oral Jewish tradition. Similar to all Orthodox Jews, these women accept Orthodox rabbis as the sole authoritative interpreters and judges of the Jewish law which delineates the parameters of what is considered permitted or forbidden.<sup>5</sup>

There is no precise number of Orthodox Jews in the world today, although various studies speak of approximately 12 million Jews worldwide, about 1.5 million of whom are Orthodox.<sup>6</sup> Orthodox Judaism today ranges from Modern Orthodox (MO) to the more right-wing Haredim<sup>7</sup> who are in turn composed of three subgroups: Hassidim<sup>8</sup>, Mitnagdim<sup>9</sup> (also called “Lithuanian” or “Yeshivish”) and Sefaradi (Oriental) Haredim.<sup>10</sup> MO and Haredi Jews follow the same basic tradition, but differ in terms of strictness of religious observance of non-*halachic* issues. These include dress codes, attitude towards language and music, the degree to which they engage or disengage with secular society, the weight each group assigns to Torah study, their attitude towards the State of Israel, the role that they assign women in religious society and their degree of interaction with non-Jews.<sup>11</sup>

The women whose virtual lives I will explore here come from all of these groups, providing us with a mosaic of Orthodox Jewish life and practice. As there is no one unifying body within Orthodox Judaism, onlookers are often confused by the relatively broad range of worldviews (*hashkafot*) found within that group. An example is the Orthodox Jewish attitude towards the use of

the Internet.<sup>12</sup> Most MO rabbis state that Internet use is permissible other than sites forbidden by *halacha*, such as pornography. In contrast, various Haredi groups either eschew the Internet or have recently permitted its use solely for business purposes but not at home. Israeli Haredim interpret this prohibition stringently, although sources mention that up to 40 percent are clandestine Internet users.<sup>13</sup> A few Haredi groups, notably those involved in outreach such as Lubavitch Hassidim, have a more positive attitude towards media in general (and the Internet in particular), and many of the Haredi women frequenting OJW virtual communities indeed belong to Lubavitch.

**Where** – The technological framework of this study is Internet forums, also known as electronic discussion groups. One type of forum is divided into topical boards which are, in turn, divided into subcategories with numerous “threads” -- individual issues being discussed -- where posters can add their comments and opinions. On other types of forums, messages are simply displayed in chronological sequence. A sense of virtual community often develops around forums with regular users, giving them yet another name – Internet communities.<sup>14</sup>

Here I will examine the electronic discourse on five English language women’s Internet forums frequented by OJW worldwide. To understand this discourse in context I will compare it to that found on five additional English language forums in which women are not the majority of posters. I will discuss each forum at length in the next section.

Although my research deals primarily with English speaking OJW, I believe that it has implications for OJW worldwide, including in Israel: the largest Orthodox Jewish community in the world. Researchers have noted how English-speaking Orthodox and Haredi immigrants in Israel often act as cultural conduits for trends from abroad, and ultimately influence the local Orthodox Jewish community.<sup>15</sup> We therefore assume that some of the trends noted in the following pages ultimately influence the lives of OJW in Israel and the rest of the non-English speaking world.

**When** – My research covers a period of eight months, beginning in August 2007 and ending in March 2008, when I charted the Internet activity on these forums. During this time two of the forums came into being, and I will explore the reasons for their creation and their differentiation from the existing OJW forums. I have continued to monitor these forums for purposes of my book-length study; however, the present study is limited to eight months only.

**What** – Topics explored are variations on the theme of “Physical Self.” Ranging from physical intimacy to issues of women’s health and issues of hygiene, they chart the physical female lives of virtual community participants from marriage to menopause and beyond. The discussions about *Taharat Hamishpacha* (TH) (“Family Purity”) are often emotionally charged as the laws and practices of *niddah* (literally “separation”) govern the physical relationship of a couple throughout their married life. Mandating complete physical

separation between husbands and wives for at least twelve days every month following the onset of a menstrual period, a couple is permitted to each other only after the wife has immersed in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath of "living water." OJW learn the intricate minutiae of TH before marriage, including the correct way of maintaining a menstrual calendar, times and methods of intimately checking themselves for purity and recognizing the stains which would render them ritually impure. What is often not taught in the preparatory *Kallah* (bridal) courses are the emotional implications for young, inexperienced and hormone-packed newlyweds, suddenly dealing with the on/off switch on a monthly basis. With the exception of issues of infertility, this appears to be one of the most loaded topics discussed on most forums within the category of "Physical Self". Other forms of "self" discussed on these forums can be categorized as "Maternal/Spousal Self," "Believing Self," "Emotional Self," "Intellectual Self" and "Domestic Self," and will be discussed elsewhere.

**Why --** This discussion is located on the crossroads of four fields with particular significance towards understanding the contemporary world: religion, gender studies, communication and virtual communities. In today's fragmented world, organized religion and belief plays a growing and vital role in delineating a framework for much of human activity.<sup>16</sup> Gender studies have made us aware of the workings and interplay of our "personal identity" and "gendered identity," both of which are the building blocks for the creation and maintenance of "self."<sup>17</sup> Communication – the meaningful interaction between human beings<sup>18</sup> -- is often gendered as well, taking on different forms depending on the sex of the articulator in question. Women's communication is often more verbal than men's,<sup>19</sup> explaining how although men predominate on the Internet, women predominate on electronic mail and certain forums.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in our modern, mobile and technological world, virtual communities have become a medium not only of communication, but also of networking, friendship and sharing. Despite their drawbacks, they play a growing and vital role in the contemporary world.<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons, I see prime significance in exploring a topic combining elements of all fields listed above. While it would be equally interesting to explore the virtual lives of women belonging to any religious group, the choice fell upon OJW due to a combination of their worldwide geographical scope and their stringent interpretation of religious doctrine dealing not only with daily life but the most intimate topics.

### **The Forums:**

My journey into the world of OJW virtual communities began by chance, when I came across *Mikolot Mayim Rabim: From the Voices of Many Waters (MMR)*,<sup>22</sup> one of the first such forums begun by an American MO female lawyer in early 2005 and devoted to the topic of TH.<sup>23</sup> While the overwhelming majority of posters are MO between the ages of 20 and 50, a few can be catego-

rized as right-wing conservative or in the process of converting to Judaism. In February 2008 over 1,200 members were listed on the forum, 170 of which were active posters.<sup>24</sup>

After a few weeks of browsing I noticed posters mentioning another forum which had recently been started, *Frummarrieds*,<sup>25</sup> created in 2007 by an English speaking right-wing Orthodox woman living in Israel, to discuss intimate aspects of OJW physical lives. Membership requires a questionnaire to prove that you are a married OJW. Although the site was created to allow members, most of whom are between their early 20s to mid 50s, to discuss any issues in their lives, most posts dealt with intimate topics. Within a few months a steady registration brought membership up to 400, of whom 158 were active posters.

Watching this forum take shape, I noted posters referring to an OJW forum on which intimate subjects were usually locked or such threads deleted.<sup>26</sup> This led me to *Imamother*: the “mother” of all exclusively OJW forums which was the first and largest married OJW forum active on the web.<sup>27</sup> Created as *Maandme* in 2004 by a young Lubavitch couple from Montreal, the imprimatur was soon changed to what became a continuous debate in itself.<sup>28</sup> Was the name of the site to be read as “Ima-Mother” -- a play on the Hebrew word for “mother” -- or was it “I’m a mother?” Four years later, the debate continues.

Membership requires a questionnaire proving that candidates are married OJW. The majority of members are Haredi women in their 20s and 30s, a large number of whom are Lubavitch (although there is a small group of active MO posters and older posters up to their mid 50s). Of the 3,400 registered members, some 2,100 are active posters with almost 30 percent having over 100 posts each, and almost 10 percent over 1,000! Little wonder that the issue of “being addicted to *Imamother*” was discussed even on other sites that referred to it by name.

Another forum I surveyed was the newly created *BTDI*<sup>29</sup>, founded in 2007 by a Lubavitch American expatriate living in Israel.<sup>30</sup> The forum, created to discuss intellectual issues from the Orthodox viewpoint, has no registration requirements but all 31 members, ranging in age from early 20s to late 40s, are married OJW. *BTDI* has no intimacy section, threads are not locked, erased or edited by the moderator, and it is relatively devoid of bashing various sects within Orthodox Judaism. The forum’s special nature is expressed in the last of its guidelines, reflecting the founder’s unique personality: “if you present your opinion as G-d’s only truth you will be left to the wolves.”<sup>31</sup>

The last forum I surveyed was the *Jewish Women’s Forum* (JWF), started in March 2005 as the Jewish Women’s Network.<sup>32</sup> Its founder is a young Lubavitch woman in the USA.<sup>33</sup> The majority of members are OJW with a few right-wing conservative members, and a growing number of women belonging to Lubavitch. Almost all of the 230 plus active posters (out of a total of almost 400 registered members) are between their mid 20s and 40s.

In addition to these forums, I also followed five forums in which OJW were active posters: *ChabadTalk*<sup>34</sup> (founded in 2001 as a mixed-sex Lubavitch discussion forum with over 3,600 members); *Eshet Chayil* and *Tisha Kabin*<sup>35</sup> (women’s forums founded in 2002 by an MO American expatriate couple in Israel to discuss women’s topics and general topics respectively, and have a combined

membership of almost 1,500 women, half of whom appear to be OJW, primarily MO);

*CalmKallahs*<sup>36</sup> (founded 2003 by an MO American female wedding planner, who integrated a mixed-sex discussion forum into her professional site; no information about numbers of posters, but most appear to be MO); and *Hashkafa.com*<sup>37</sup> (founded 2003 as a mixed-sex Orthodox Jewish site, boasting 3,600 members of all Orthodox backgrounds).

Each of the five OJW forums that I observed are unique in their history, focus and dynamics and they boast a combined membership of close to 5,500 women of whom almost 2,700 are active posters. The comparative forums have a combined membership of over 8,600 members (without *CalmKallahs*), of whom more than 3,100 are active posters. This brings us to a total of 14,100 members and almost 6,000 active posters. Although there is a certain overlap in membership between groups, we can easily speak about 90 percent being individual posters/members who can provide us with insight into the unfolding dynamics in the lives of various groups of OJW.

### Methodological Issues:

What needs do these forums meet in the religious Jewish female community? Why are they growing? What can the forum topics, development and dynamics teach us about the historical development and unfolding culture of OJW? These are the broader issues that I will address here through the prism of the forum discussions about physical self.

Before answering these questions, let me address several pertinent methodological issues connected with the nature and problems of the Internet in general, and virtual communities in particular. The first is veracity.<sup>38</sup> Are the people on these forums really who they claim to be or are they online frauds? Due to the close-knit nature of the Orthodox Jewish world, a large proportion of posters know each other in real life. Identities can be checked from links to personal blogs or enterprises in their signature, and as they function within what they consider to be a safe web environment, members often volunteer verifiable personal information in their posts.

The second problem is representation. Are posters on these forums representative of Orthodox and Haredi women? There is no clear-cut answer to this question in view of the low numbers of posters from certain Orthodox streams such as left-wing MO or separatist Hassidic sects. However, by crosschecking issues and positions raised on the forums with contemporary studies of the communities in question and discussions in contemporary Orthodox Jewish publications, forum discussions appear indicative of the gender dynamics within large portions of Orthodox Jewry today.

The third issue is research scope. What can you learn from perusing ten virtual communities for less than a year? How can one keep such a circumscribed study from becoming an anecdotal presentation of popular culture or a public bearing of psychic virtual wounds?<sup>39</sup> It is imperative to stress that the

present study is a work in progress, charting and analyzing trends throughout their nascence, development and, when applicable, their disintegration down the slippery slope to cultural oblivion. Such ongoing studies are not seeking an immediate “bottom line” but a balanced presentation of an ever-changing dynamic. The designated research arena is well suited to this challenge.

Three additional methodological points deal with posters, topics and forum language. While the dearth of extreme ultra-Orthodox posters is understandable, why are there relatively few MO women posting on some forums? As MO life is freer of communal constraints than that of Haredi women, it may be that these women have other outlets for discussions on gendered topics, read a more varied type of literature, have secular friends to consult with about intimate matters, received a broader secular education allowing them access to more information about topics discussed, aren’t interested in endless discussions about hashkafa and aren’t afraid to ask for information about practical issues from reliable secular and non-Jewish authorities. This can explain the rapid demise of a forum begun in late 2007 for MO women<sup>40</sup> which never gained momentum.

Topics appearing on one forum often soon appear on another, broadening the discussion’s scope. This is a result of the overlap of members between the various forums, and the centrality of the issues being raised.

The language used on the various forums is indicative of their nature, cultural norms and their moderators’ and members’ hashkafa. Apart from ubiquitous Internet abbreviations, there are others which one must understand to navigate the forums surveyed. These include “DH,” “DD,” “DS” (dear husband/daughter/son), “LOR” (Local Orthodox Rabbi) to whom posters are continuously being sent in order to solve problems, and the ability to decipher modest language (euphemisms) used by the stricter Orthodox Jews regarding certain acts or body parts. Among Haredim, the sex act is known as “performing the mitzvah,” or *onah*<sup>41</sup>, and Hebrew terms are often used for body parts. Some forums (usually the mixed ones) allow both anatomical and slang expressions, others only anatomical terms, and one forum employs an automatic filter to change “unsuitable” words. Through the wonders of the “morals filter,” sex becomes relations, penis is automatically turned into eiver, vagina becomes private parts, and the word sexual is automatically hyphenated into “s-xual.”

A final methodological point has to do with the method of citations, or rather the lack of precise citations, regarding the forums. Although I refer to topics of individual threads, I do not quote verbatim from most forums or bring precise citations although they are, of course, in my possession. This decision was originally taken in order to avoid legal issues; however, it metamorphosed into an attempt to protect the anonymity and dignity of the posters who I followed for close to a year. As the purpose of this study is not to chart the forums in themselves but to note what historical and cultural trends they express in the world of OJW, I have relied on citations from parallel existing documentation of these trends.

## The Physical Self

At all stages of our lives we are involved with discovering, developing or maintaining our physical selves. However, during the reproductive years, issues concerning the physical self, and particularly those concerning intimacy, conception or its prevention, childbirth and female health and hygiene, often take on special meaning. This is especially true for married OJW whose personal timetable and intimate clocks during their fertile years are written and set by halacha. When, how and where are they permitted to touch their husbands? Are they are permitted or prohibited to plan or prevent conception? To what degree they are permitted by Jewish law or traditional custom (*minhag*) to have screening tests during pregnancy? These are only a few of the issues with which married OJW grapple throughout their reproductive years.

## Topics

I have called this catchall topic “the physical self” because of its overwhelming bodily aspects. Its first issue is intimacy, called “*Tahor* (Ritually pure) Days” on some forums. Physical intimacy, a pivotal factor in normative marital relationships, is often connected with issues of attachment and earlier forms of physical contact prior to marriage.<sup>42</sup> In his study of adolescents’ recollections of early physical contact, Mark D. Oleson writes about the connection between “intimacy, attachment, parental warmth, physical affection, trust, and marital satisfaction.”<sup>43</sup> While biological and anatomical compatibility is usually attained over a relatively short period of time, cultural and emotional constraints are often equally important factors in the successful achievement of “the ten stages of physical intimacy.”<sup>44</sup> In the stricter circles of Orthodox Judaism which eschew physical contact between men and women other than husband and wife, only the first, non-physical stages are possible before marriage. Even among the MO, premarital overtly sexual acts are highly disapproved of. Orthodox Jews often enter into marriage with little or no physical experience with the opposite sex, and in the stricter Haredi circles, the couple meets only a few times before the wedding. Thus, the transition from single to couple is a physical and emotional upheaval in which halacha and minhag act both as constraints and as familiar signposts in a changing and often threatening world.<sup>45</sup>

*Taharat Hamishpacha* (called “Family Sanctity,” “*Nidda* Days” or “Mikva and TH” on various forums), is one of these constraints, familiar to the new brides from *Kallah* classes<sup>46</sup> that have become an almost mandated prerequisite to marriage in the Orthodox and Haredi world. As the framework of TH becomes the pendulum to which intimate life swings for the first decades of marriage, many threads on these forums deal with the topic, despite the plethora of literature on its purpose, practice and deeper meaning.<sup>47</sup>

The emphasis to “be fruitful and multiply” is a not only a Biblical commandment but a traditional attribute of Jewish families. In recent years, gender studies of Orthodox women have scrutinized the growing social pressures

to expand one's family, often with little regard to economic considerations and even, at times, health constraints.<sup>48</sup> Little wonder then, that the topics of fertility and infertility ("Not Yet Blessed," "Family Planning," "Birth Control," "Infertility" and "Contraception") are often the most difficult and painful threads in the sections devoted to physical self.

As the natural outcome of Orthodox Jewish marriage is supposed to be the birth of children, a great deal of forum discussion is devoted to the topics of pregnancy and childbirth. These are treated not only as topics unto themselves, but also as a part of women's health and hygiene, larger issues that are not age specific and act as a chronological transition from younger to older posters, unlike those dealing with various aspects of reproductive years.

Not all forums cover topics of physical self. On some such as *MMR*, they are the overwhelming majority of topics being discussed. On others, such as the intellectual *BTDT*, they are mentioned only in passing, without devoting specific threads to them.

## Threads and Polls

To what degree do OJW discuss their physical selves in these forums? What issues interest them? How many intimate topics are 'hot' and how many die out after one thread? Who are the main posters and which groups within Orthodox Judaism do they come from? In what ways do the discussions on these forums mirror trends and issues affecting the frum female community in the past and present?

Discussions of various aspects of physical self on the forums follow a repetitive pattern with threads falling into four broad categories: ritual and religious law, technical issues, emotional issues and polls. The first category mirrors the Orthodox Jewish framework of halacha delineating the parameters in which these women live their lives, and the degree of minhag which they keep that affects their physical selves. The second is a combination of topics that one might find discussed in many women's magazines today, but they are often examined in the light of religious dicta of permitted and forbidden. The category dealing with emotional issues appears to be the least affected by the Orthodox Jewish framework, although much of the discussion is overshadowed by the emphasis on physical modesty in most OJW's education. The final category – polls – appears to be both an indicator of queries, concerns or distress in OJW's physical lives, and at the same time, a social outlet for comparisons. Its very existence and amount of space that it takes up on certain forums indicates that it fulfils an important need in certain sectors in OJW society today.

## Ritual and Religious Law

"Must one be naked during relations?" ("Yes," according to some posters citing religious sources of becoming "one flesh"), "What is halachically

permitted in terms of sexual positions?" ("Everything," according to MO; "missionary is best" according to the most stringent, each corroborating their answer with different religious sources), "Is oral sex permitted?" (For men, only if they conclude the act "in the regular place"; for women the issue is debatable), "What should one think of during "the mitzvah"? ("Holy thoughts," "great Rabbis and Sages," "your love for your dh"), "Is one permitted to have relations with a baby in the room?" ("If baby is asleep"), "Are women permitted to use a vibrator alone or during relations?" (No definitive answer, leading to a debate over whether women are permitted to masturbate according to halacha). These are just some of the threads devoted to issues of ritual and religious practice, appearing under the topic of "permitted intimacy" on the various OJW forums.

The responses can range from serious to amusing, showing that even the frummiest OJW can possess a lively sense of humor. On a thread asking whether one is permitted to have relations with a picture of a Rabbi in the room, one poster told readers to ask themselves whether a man would be comfortable being intimate with his wife in a room with a large picture of his mother in law! Certain threads, such as the repeating one regarding permitted sexual positions, attest to the need that many young married OJW today have to make sure that they are correctly performing even the most intimate of acts. This appears to be part of a trend in the Orthodox Jewish and particularly Haredi world during the past decade or more, regarding the zeal in searching for *humrot*, stringent interpretations of Jewish practice which exceed the requirements of halacha.<sup>49</sup> One wonders what young OJW did before the existence of boards where they could post such questions anonymously.

While interesting unto itself, this last group of threads became the focus of a discussion carried from forum to forum, hinting to possible discord regarding issues of intimacy within the strict Orthodox Jewish community. In answer to many of the repeated questions regarding *halachically* permitted variations of "the act" (time, positions, locations), posters exhorted each other not to look for lenient halachic opinions (known as *kulot*) as intimacy is an act of holiness. However, on at least two forums, posters noted that on a third, more Haredi forum, there was a parallel set of threads concerning husbands complaining about being deprived in the bedroom and either being addicted to pornography or looking for satisfaction outside of marriage. Could there be a connection between the two threads, they asked? Is the striving of many OJW for halachic perfection and stringency in matters of intimacy one reason that their husbands are being alienated in the bedroom and looking for satisfaction elsewhere? This led to numerous posters expressing their disgust in such men's actions, and even more stating that this must have been written by a troll as such men couldn't exist in "our communities." The vibrant and vitriolic discussions over this issue are deserving of note in view of the fact that they arose in at least five separate instances and on several boards during the eight-month period surveyed.

Almost all forums boast threads dealing with ritual and religious practice of women who have to immerse in the mikvah on Friday night when there are halachic constraints of Sabbath prohibitions and social constraints, such as finding a babysitter or being invited to others for the Sabbath eve meal. "Am I permitted to push off mikvah immersion if it falls on a Friday night?" (No, unless there is no mikvah in walking distance); "Should I ask my husband to stay home from shul (synagogue) to babysit if I have to *toivel* (immerse) on Friday night?" (Overwhelming "yes"); "How am I permitted to comb my long hair at the *mikvah* on Friday night [when it is forbidden to comb one's hair]?" (Comb it at home before the Sabbath, secure it with several elastic bands to keep it from tangling). Other threads pertaining to ritual and TH deal with the minutiae of the various times one must check for staining, forms of stains and their meaning, or the general problem of mikvah night falling on a date when one is invited to a wedding or other festivity and the need to make excuses for being late without giving precise explanations of where one had been due to issues of modesty.

"I have two children, am pregnant with a third, and don't think I can cope with more. After this child may I ask [a rabbi] for a *heter* ["dispensation," in this case, to use birth control]?" The majority of ritual questions about fertility are variations on this theme. On the more Haredi-leaning forums, such questions often elicit powerful responses ranging from attempts to cajole the OP (original poster) that once the baby is born she will feel differently, to vehemently criticizing her to stop being selfish in view of her responsibility to the Jewish people. As certain posters are members of several forums, responses to issues appearing on one are occasionally discussed on another. In this case, threads appeared on at least two additional forums deriding Haredi posters on the original forum for their lack of sympathy and empathy to the OP's needs. Others pointed to the infertility posts, reminding women who want to request heterim how lucky they are that they can become pregnant.

The majority of infertility posts dealing with religious issues refer to the numerous *segulot* (spiritual remedies) for becoming pregnant, reminding infertile posters about particular days to pray or ritual acts to perform for that purpose.<sup>50</sup> Others ask about ways of overcoming what is known as "halachic infertility," caused when a woman ovulates before the date of her immersion, technically rendering her infertile.

"Are pregnant women permitted to fast on Yom Kippur?" (Yes, unless doctors specify otherwise), "What is the halachic perspective on genetic screening?" (Depends on your LOR),<sup>51</sup> "When do women become niddah during childbirth? (After vaginal bleeding). These are among the common ritual threads dealing with pregnancy and childbirth found on the various forums. They are also an opportunity for veteran mothers to share halachic knowledge and personal experience with newly pregnant posters. Most of these threads appear to be posted by women with two children or less (some 50 percent of the members according to a poll on the largest forum surveyed) and answered by mothers of five children or more (20 percent of the posters on that same forum).

Posts focusing on religious and ritual aspects of women's health and hygiene often deal with variations of other intimate issues. "Are you permitted to apply or remove a menstrual pad on the Sabbath because of the glue?" (Yes as it isn't permanent); "How can one get one's hair back in shape to look decent for my husband after a three day holiday [when one is not permitted to comb one's hair]?" (It's a problem); "Can a woman shower over a three day holiday [when bathing is questionable]?" (Yes, as long as you don't wash your hair or bathe your entire body).

### Technical Issues

While posts regarding ritual and religious issues of physical self are specific to OJW, technical issues dealing with these topics are not. What can a woman do in order to heighten her attraction to her husband and where can one go on dates with him? What is the best way to clean up after relations? Where can one find sexy lingerie in plus sizes? What type of birth control is best for various people? What did you do with your older children while you are in the hospital when your baby is born? While most of these questions could be found in women's discussion groups everywhere, the answers often reflect the posters' Orthodox education and lifestyle choices. Dates with one's husband can only be permitted places of eating or entertainment, birth control choices depend on the type of *heter* given by one's rabbinical authority, and a mother in childbirth with six older children has a different set of logistics to face than one having her second child.

Numerous threads regarding technical issues in women's health and hygiene are also common to women everywhere ("Is what I have depression?"; "When should I get a first mammogram?"; "Anyone with experience with homeopathy?"). Several lengthy threads on two of the more modern OJW forums dealt with the pros and cons of "Brazilian waxing" versus "bikini waxing." In view of modesty issues in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish world I was initially surprised to find a thread called "Brazilian?" on a forum with a predominantly Haredi membership; however, my surprise turned to laughter when I realized that it was a thread looking for forum members from Brazil!

Certain threads about health and hygiene are indicative of what one of the MO active forum members referred to as "the woeful ignorance of certain posters regarding their own bodies."<sup>52</sup> These are usually from Haredi posters who are sometimes unfamiliar with their personal anatomy because of the emphasis on physical modesty in both their education and upbringing. The common Haredi solution involves educating girls about these issues right before marriage, giving pre-teen and teenage girls minimal information regarding physical aspects of puberty. Consequently, one finds long, involved threads exhorting kallah teachers to draw anatomical diagrams for brides showing them rear and front passages because so many girls have no idea how they are built "below" (a euphemism for the pelvic area).

One category of technical threads is distinctive of the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle: How does one make two beds into one?<sup>53</sup> What techniques may be used to have a certain degree of oral sex while still keeping to the limitations of halacha forbidding “wasting of seed?” “What difficulties have you had with mikvah attendants?” It appears that more MO posters than Haredim participate in technical threads, except those with Orthodox Jewish bearing.

## Emotional Issues

One group of threads about emotional issues dealing with physical intimacy could be taken from contemporary women’s media: What should a wife do if she is never in the mood for intimacy? How can she become more emotionally comfortable wearing sexy lingerie for her husband? In what way can she best deal with her husband’s fetishes or his likes/dislikes for her various body parts? These and other issues should nevertheless be viewed within the broader context of OJW’s education, which places an extraordinary emphasis on issues of physical modesty and modest behavior. Furthermore, some of the emotional questions, such as those by posters stating that they aren’t in the mood for sex during the permitted days, have heavy halachic ramifications in view of the fact that marital intimacy is limited to approximately two weeks out of every month. This last thread appeared frequently on several forums but was treated differently on each. On the forum with a large Hassidic membership, after a brief discussion and exhortation that women should do their utmost to please their husbands, the thread was usually locked.<sup>54</sup> On forums with more MO posters the discussions developed into broader topics such as a woman’s right to and ownership of her own body and the right to say no in spite of the time limitations imposed on Orthodox intimacy.

Emotional threads dealing with TH usually focus on problems between couples keeping the numerous limitations these laws involve. “My dh and I have monthly arguments about not sleeping in one bed,” writes one poster on a Haredi-leaning forum where responders send her virtual hugs and remind her to “keep strong” before the thread is locked. On a more modern forum, a similar thread is met with responses to “take it step by step” and even a debate over what is the minimum prohibited by halacha as opposed to additional strictures added on later. Other threads are nevertheless indicative of certain gender changes in the Orthodox Jewish world in which men are being asked to play a more active role in what gender scholars refer to as “women’s society.”<sup>55</sup> “How can I become emotionally closer to my dh during the *niddah* times when we can’t be physically close?” or “How involved should dh be in the technical female aspects of TH” (such as keeping a *niddah* calendar, etc.)?

Some of the most painful emotional threads deal with infertility. “What do I say to people who ask why I’m not pregnant yet?”; “How can I cope with friends who are pregnant?”; “How do I deal with those Jewish holidays in which children play a pivotal role?” On their part, pregnant posters ask “How should I cope with family pressure to give the baby a particular family

name that I don't like?" (as a second name); "Why am I being blamed for my c-section?", and even "I need encouragement to continue breast feeding!" Two forums contain a section for posters to share their "birth stories" and bearing in mind the family status of most posters, this is one of the most frequently viewed threads in that sub-forum.

Health and hygiene can also be sensitive issues. "My dh is always comparing me to others in terms of size!" This cry, which could easily appear on any woman's forum regardless of religion or status, takes on special significance in view of the threads regarding matchmaking in the contemporary Orthodox and particularly Haredi world, where issues of weight ("few boys are interested in a girl who is more than a size 2 or 4"<sup>56</sup>) are among the first questions asked when making a match.

## Polls

The fourth category – polls – provides a different type of insight about norms and needs within Orthodox Jewish society. Those dealing with intimacy range from the informative ("At what age did you tell your daughter the facts of life?) to questions with *halachic* implications of modesty ("Do you hug in front of your children?"), and even verging on the kinky ("Husband wants to take nude pictures of you, what to do?"). Some polls, such as that mentioned as the beginning of this article ("Are you attracted to...?"), are considered too risqué by the moderators of a particular forum, denuded of their "poll" section, and ultimately remain as a thread.

Polls on TH revolve around personal practice ("Who takes questionable stains to the rabbi, you or dh?") or individual practice of each couple ("How do you tell dh that you have become niddah?"). Those about fertility and infertility involve questions about contraception ("What type of birth control do you use?", "How long did it take you to become pregnant after using birth control?") and sensitivity to the plight of infertile women ("Should an infertility board be closed to women with children?"; "How do you feel about posters on this thread who post using pictures of their children as avatars?").

Polls about pregnancy and childbirth often focus on the process, ("Did you spot during pregnancy?"), the framework ("Would you use a male gynecologist?"), or the results ("What gender did you pray for?"). While health and hygiene polls can be innocuous ("What is your favorite color of nail polish?"), others have strong *halachic* overtones dealing with modesty ("If you see a salesman at a makeup counter, do you leave or ask for a woman?"). A third type centers around the reproductive ("How long are your cycles?"), and the last group, ostensibly pure health questions ("Have you deliberately stayed out in the sun to tan during the past five years?") also have covert *halachic* implications due to the commandment of preserving one's life.

Apart from the purely informative nature of polls, they fulfill another purpose on many of these forums. Orthodox and particularly Haredi society often acts as a tight-knit community with a plethora of social events, charitable

organizations and communal activities. However, it also tends to develop a social nature referred to as the “shtetl mentality,” named for the small Jewish communities in Eastern Europe where, traditionally, everyone knew “what was cooking in everyone else’s pot” and had something to say about it.<sup>57</sup> The polls on these forums enable members to garner information (“I’m normal!”) while the explanatory threads allow them to tacitly vent, offer social or even halachic justification of their situation or provide reinforcement of their opinion on a particular matter, without their having to expose themselves to the scrutiny and inevitable judgment of their family, friends and neighbors.

This need is connected to a subcategory dealing with intimacy appearing in the *Shana Rishona* (literally, “First Year”) section on several forums.<sup>58</sup> Ostensibly limited to women during their first year of marriage, members of one forum voted that women could post if they were married three years or less. Although they are not defined as such, almost all threads in this section are comparative-informative (“Did you use birth control to regulate your period before marriage?”, “What did you do in the *yichud* room?”<sup>59</sup>, “What should they have taught you in Kallah classes but didn’t?”, “Is your mother-in-law getting involved with the fact that you aren’t pregnant yet?”), offering new brides an opportunity to share and compare, often anonymously. As the majority of posters on forums maintaining a *shana rishona* board are young women, this is a popular section that can indicate trends among newly married OJW today.

## Comparison

How do these threads compare with discussions of physical self on the mixed-sex or not specifically OJW forums? Some have threads similar to those found on the five OJW forums. These include Friday night mikvah problems, showing affection in front of children, questions about intimacy during pregnancy, fantasizing during sex, oral sex and *halacha*, questions regarding twin beds, Kallah classes, and Orthodox husbands having trouble with “manly temptations.”

Mixed-sex forums, in particular, offer an Orthodox male view of issues mentioned on the OWJ forums. “My wife prays as I climax!” complains one poster who is answered by trolls suggesting that he sing back to her, leading to a spin-off thread about “songs to *shtup* by”.<sup>60</sup> However, serious posters tell him how lucky he is to be married to a devout wife who wants pure children. Some male posts counterbalance the OJW’s posts on intimacy, asking what to do about wives who insist on keeping the minutiae of TH during the niddah days but not being interested in sex during the two weeks after immersion. In these forums, one sees the other side of the coin regarding those posts where women voice disgust of husbands addicted to pornography or encourage women uninterested in intimacy to remain true to their feelings in spite of the calendar. In brief, one finds some of the same issues, many more trolls, but often an interesting Orthodox male perspective.

## Discussion

While a description of these forums can provide hours of fascinating anecdotal evidence for social scientists, here I would like to focus on the historical and cultural significance of my findings. In order to do so, let me return to two of the questions which I posed earlier concerning the broader framework in which these forums, boards and threads should be viewed. In what ways do the discussions on these forums mirror trends and issues affecting the frum female community in the past and present? What historical and cultural dynamics do they represent in the various contemporary Orthodox Jewish communities? To these I wish to add a third question: Apart from mirroring existing trends, what potential role do these forums play among Orthodox Jewish women in shaping individual and possibly even communal response to these issues?

Bearing in mind that this is a preliminary study, I wish to briefly delineate seven developments affecting contemporary Orthodox and Haredi Jewish communities which find echoes in the threads, posts, issues and opinions voiced on OJW forums. All of these trends are dynamic and ongoing, leaving their mark in different ways on various aspects of Orthodox daily life.

- 1) **Religious Strictures** – Historians and social scientists have long noted the inclination towards seeking humrot in contemporary Orthodox and particularly Haredi communities.<sup>61</sup> While this trend has deep historical roots stretching back to Talmudic times, the reasons behind its modern manifestations are complex and include theological, sociological and psychological factors.<sup>62</sup> For some it is a response to the decline in values in Western civilization in general and their surrounding society in particular, for others it is an attempt to purify themselves and their society as a prelude to messianic days, and for a third group it is a response to what they consider laxity in Jewish practice prior to the Holocaust which led, according to certain Haredi Rabbis, to the resulting cataclysm.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, increasing groups of Orthodox men and women have adopted more stringent halachic practices than were common a generation ago in various aspects of Jewish life. This is particularly prevalent among Haredim, many of whom attempt to ensure that their practice is correct by the strictest of standards. The dichotomy between MO and Haredi groups in their zeal to adopt humrot (which Haredim often view as “normative behavior” while considering MOs as seeking kulot) is one reason that Haredim cite for their opinion of MO Jews being “half-way to secular” despite the fact that many remain deep within the limits of halacha in terms of their personal practice.<sup>64</sup>

Modesty and issues of intimacy are often singled out in Haredi rabbinical sermons as requiring particularly stringent practice, with speakers drawing direct parallels between lax modesty or lenient intimate behavior and disasters befalling the Jewish world. Even without discussing the feminist take on this choice of issues being singled out, in practice it places much of the onus on women in terms of maintaining stringency and accepting responsibility for the future of the entire Jewish people.<sup>65</sup>

Apart from the religious significance in adopting strictures, the practice has also become a form of tacit competition between various groups and individuals who try to outdo each other in punctilious practice. As opposed to those rabbinical authorities of previous generations who would mandate humrot in one field while offering kulot in another, the tendency today in certain groups is often more in the sole direction of categorical and almost blind humrot.<sup>66</sup> Certain widespread, contemporary *humrot*, particularly in the field of physical self, actually grew “from below” and only received rabbinical sanction *ex post facto*.

All of these factors receive expression on forums surveyed. On certain forums, Haredi posters are continuously outdoing each other in finding additional humrot about intimacy, citing them as normative behavior. There are frequent debates between the more modern and Haredi posters over the Haredi women’s tendency to present what their kallah teachers explained to be “preferred practices” (sex at night, in the dark, missionary position) as the only halachically correct method. On their part, certain Haredi posters have stated that MO women “live an intimate life of kulot”<sup>67</sup> due to their general unwillingness to limit the scope and variety of their intimate lives unless halachically mandated by MO rabbinical authorities. This clash often leads to virtual battles that begin with a general “bashing” of one group or another and usually end with a number of Haredi posters wielding the ultimate weapon of delegitimization by stating that MO rabbis are “not really Orthodox rabbis,” as any rabbi who would permit the particular intimate practice under discussion “must actually be Conservative or Reform.”<sup>68</sup> The existence and nature of these virtual battles ostensibly support the results of contemporary studies of Orthodox Jewish life that speak of a general “slide to the right,” particularly in American Orthodoxy.<sup>69</sup>

But what do we actually know about the motives of Haredi or right-wing Orthodox posters who ask the various questions about intimate practice that initiate each thread? Is it certain that they are only looking for advice or support as part of a desire to adopt yet another humra, or are we possibly hearing a faint echo of dissent? Stringencies in the field of intimate practice are a never-ending source of discussion with differences of opinion or custom regarding correct practice causing potential marital strife. Even when both husband and wife accept the necessity for humrot, tensions regarding the minutiae of this practice can be stressful. This can lead to discord over issues that would have not been debated a generation ago, or mental and emotional strain in terms of practice, even when both partners are on the same wavelength.<sup>70</sup>

Could it be that some right-wing Orthodox or Haredi women, often posting anonymously, are unable or unwilling to live with the stress, strains and tensions of a life of continuous humrot? Are these forums acting as a subversive outlet for women who are looking for social or halachic justification to maintain what had been the Orthodox status quo for many years before this process began? Moreover, in view of their exposure on these

forums to the modern religious way of life (which for some is the first serious and continuous contact that they have ever had with MO women), are some possibly being influenced by their MO peers to look for what their reference group would consider to be halachic leniency? The tendency to judge threads by their responses, which on certain OJW forums almost all tend towards stringency, and the common Internet behavior of becoming enamored with text<sup>71</sup> often blurs our view of the OP's true subtext. Only by a longer observation of these forums, and juxtaposing threads with corresponding tendencies which may ultimately express themselves in the Orthodox Jewish community, can we reach a more definitive answer to what are meanwhile open ended questions.

- 2) **Religious Education** – The nature of girls' and women's education in Orthodox Jewish society has gone through a tremendous metamorphosis since the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> The first such initiative – the Bais Ya'akov Orthodox girls' school system, started by Krakow seamstress Sara Schenierer during the 1920s – set the tone for Orthodox Jewish girls' schools by combining religious education with secular subjects. Since that time, the trend has continued with schools built along variations of these lines becoming *de rigueur* in both Orthodox and Haredi society.<sup>73</sup>

While a number of areas in Haredi girls' education (such as religious subjects) have broadened throughout the years, during the last decades of the twentieth century other topics were slowly minimized or even deleted from the curriculum in a growing number of Haredi educational networks. This bears out what sociologist Tamar El-Or refers to when speaking of a society of young Haredi women who are educated to be ignorant.<sup>74</sup> Subjects under assault were primarily those which certain spiritual leaders felt would harm the innocence of teenage girls, such as human biology, physiognomy or even personal hygiene. This was yet another manifestation of two previously mentioned trends, equating the disasters befalling the Jewish people with laxity in chastity and adding humrot in the sphere of modesty. These lacunae in the Haredi curriculum, seen as extremist steps by the more MO educators, not only created a sterile learning environment regarding physical issues through the high school and seminary years, but also lead to deliberate ignorance of basic health facts in issues that have bearing on intimacy. Marital and even health problems stemming from this lacuna are discussed on the various forums, with the vociferously Haredi posters insisting that the existing situation is still the lesser of all evils. Their common solution proffered is not to alter the curriculum, but to supplement existing sketchy information only shortly before marriage.<sup>75</sup>

Do all Haredi posters agree with this state of affairs? From the numbers of questions continuously asked by young right-wing Orthodox and Haredi married women regarding physiology and hygiene and their comments about "what they wish their kallah teachers had taught them," it is not certain. Expressing their dismay when a young married MO poster mentioned that her mother had never taught her the facts of life that she ultimately

learned from Internet porn sites, several Haredi posters asked whether MO girls, who are not as limited in their teenage years as their Haredi counterparts, don't have better sources of information. Interestingly, there was no Haredi censure of her actions, only sadness and surprise that as a MO girl with "the world open to her," she was left with such an unfortunate "educational" choice. On a number of forums frequented both by Haredi and MO women, there are growing number of Haredi women who utilize the setting in order to learn about various health issues from the more modern posters. Strikingly, these forums often act as a meeting place between various groups of young Orthodox Jewish women who in the polarized Jewish world of this generation would probably never had met or exchanged information about ways of life. Some of the most frequently viewed posts on these forums are the informative ones about "Hassidic Life," "Lubavitch Life," "Modern Orthodox Beliefs," etc.

Returning to the issue at hand, until now, the number of Haredi posters who have called for a reform in this matter of girls' education has been small, and they are usually "shouted down" within a number of hours after posting their opinion. While not comprising a grassroots movement as of yet, dissenting posts appear to be a continuous trickle on the various sites and I noted their numbers growing throughout the eight months during which I surveyed these forums.

- 3) **Limited Exposure to Outside Educational Material** – The educated/ignorant dichotomy mentioned earlier is not restricted to the field of formal education but can be found in informal settings as well. A growing tendency towards cultural separatism among the more right-wing Orthodox Jews has led to a policy of voluntarily limiting their exposure to potentially dangerous cultural conduits such as contemporary secular literature, television or even general women's and family magazines. Citing what they view as the licentious nature of various contemporary publications, Haredi rabbinical authorities have attempted to negate the Eastern European Jewish tradition of a growing women's literacy in secular and even non-Jewish literature which began during the nineteenth century, even in the most Orthodox sectors.<sup>76</sup> This is yet another example of the inherent contradiction in the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of contemporary Haredi society. While ostensibly trying to re-create the pre-war Eastern European Jewish world, it is in practice basing this new society on widespread observance of what had been very limited practices of the time—humrot, asceticism, or full time torah study—or post-war innovations such a norm of extremely large families.

Aware of the need for cultural outlets, right-wing Orthodox and Haredi rabbinical leaders have permitted the dissemination of "light" Haredi literature and family magazines such as *Mishpacha*, *Binah*, and *Marveh Latzame*.<sup>77</sup> However, their subjects must be vetted by a "spiritual board" which limits their usefulness as a source of general information that could combat the ignorance regarding various biological and psychological issues. When

this problem is raised on the forums, right-wing Orthodox and Haredi posters often state that rigorous censorship is the only way to ensure that the publication will remain “clean,” and that women who need information about intimate subjects should be taught all they need to know by their kallah teachers. But turning to the threads about what girls wish their kallah teachers had taught them, one finds more than the occasional dissenting voice from Haredi posters stating that kallah teachers are at times limited, and maybe they shouldn’t be the only source of intimate information in the Haredi community.

While these are by far the minority voices, their very existence is significant. Not only does it appear that these forums act as an anonymous outlet for dissent among certain groups of OJW, primarily those in the right-wing and Haredi world, but the very existence of such posts appears to encourage additional posters from that same world to express their incredulity, misgivings and even skepticism of various trends manifesting themselves there. The extent of this dissent and the direction that it may take is, however, yet to be determined.

- 4) **The Demographic Imperative** – In previous generations, the size of religious families was not a matter of discussion. Prior to the advent of modern birth control, the shorter scope of women’s fertile years and long periods of nursing acted as factors naturally limiting family size. A high rate of infant mortality and then insoluble fertility issues were additional factors often leading to Orthodox families of moderate size. Finally, during the period between the two World Wars, much of Orthodox Jewish society was slowly acculturating into modern social and demographic patterns and limiting the size of their family by choice.<sup>78</sup>

Since the late 1950s and the creation of what sociologist Menachem Friedman calls “the society of scholars” among Haredi Jews<sup>79</sup>, there has been a growing trend towards larger families in the Orthodox world. During the past generation in particular, overt educational and covert social pressures in the Orthodox and Haredi communities have created standards where families of four children and more in the MO communities and eight children and up in certain Haredi communities, are considered “average.” While the majority of MO Jews determine the size of their family, using halachically permitted birth control but without consulting individually with rabbinical authorities, the more right-wing groups insist that women wishing a hiatus from childbearing must receive individual rabbinic permission to do so. Even when rabbinical authorities are understanding enough of women’s needs to grant such a dispensation, women’s society pressures its members to not request such dispensations through covert competition over family size, upholding standards of large families as a societal norm and censuring small families for any reason other than dire medical necessity. Although as Debra Kaufman states, “gender identity process and practice are critical to women of the religious right,”<sup>80</sup> their definition of gender identity often centers around the demographic

imperative and their role in fulfilling what they see as the Orthodox Jewish manifest destiny.<sup>81</sup>

How do the women in question feel about this destiny? From the threads appearing on the five forums surveyed, there appear to be no discussions regarding family size in the MO community other than in cases of infertility. This changed as soon as the posters were primarily Haredi women. During the period surveyed there were two types of posts from members of various Haredi communities that pointed to a covert discord and even conflict over issues relating to this demographic imperative. One group was from young women with infants and toddlers finding themselves pregnant, overwhelmed and wishing to ask for a dispensation to use birth control after this baby. While most posts written in response vociferously negated this desire, the existence of these posts is an indication of possible dissent regarding automatic adherence to this demographic imperative. The second group of posts are those regarding the forms of birth control used by posters and methods to cope with various difficulties (such as spotting) that arise as a result of their use. The largest section on this subject appears on the primarily Haredi forum, hinting to a more widespread use of family planning methods than one would assume in that society.

Finally, there are a growing number of posts by young married right-wing Orthodox and Haredi women with one or two children writing about their older female relatives' involvement in the size of their family. Unaware that they are using birth control, their mothers and mothers-in-law express repeated concern about their fertility as a number of years have passed since their last child. Although almost all posts on these subjects are written anonymously, they point to a growing reality among the more right wing OJW. Other than medical reasons which are stated overtly, it is not possible from many of the posts regarding birth control to determine whether the reasons for the desire to prevent pregnancy are personal (exhaustion, overwork in childcare), economic (the difficult financial situation of Haredi couples where the wife is sole breadwinner while the husband learns), or emotional (the desire to be able to devote more time to existing children). Here, too, we will have to wait to see whether these posts are representative of a slowly but steadily developing demographic trend among right-wing Orthodox and certain Haredi Jewish communities that will only evidence itself in half a generation or more.

- 5) **Feminism** – The growing influence of feminism in the contemporary world has left its mark on various sectors of Orthodoxy.<sup>82</sup> Women in left-wing and modern Orthodox communities have expressed desires for equal roles in public Jewish practice, leading to women's prayer groups and the establishment of Orthodox feminist organizations such as the American JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) or the Israeli *Kolech*.<sup>83</sup> The influence of feminism in more right-wing religious Jewish communities has taken a different form. Despite Kaufman's statements regarding the gender identity process of women in the religious right, in many Haredi commu-

nities gender equality is not considered a value and women and men are exhorted to fulfill their traditional religious and social roles. Due to the nature of the “society of scholars” where Haredi men often study in *Kollel* (religious study framework for married men) for many years after their marriage while their wives work, some Haredi men carry out traditionally female gendered tasks such as taking children to kindergarten and school, picking them up and giving small children lunch when they return from nursery and daycare. However, this is usually not being done as an expression of gender equality but rather to enable women to fulfill their role as breadwinner and enable their husbands to devote their lives to Torah study.

Nevertheless, the Haredi world is not completely impervious to outside gender influences, as may be seen by several groups of threads, although their focus is very different than those written by MO posters. One deals with the sumptuary laws that have recently been enacted by Rebbees of various Hassidic courts stating, among other things, that brides should not be given diamond engagement rings but rather those with cubic zirconium.<sup>84</sup> “And what about limiting the price paid for *shtraimels* (broad Hassidic fur hats worn only by married men and bought for bridegrooms)?” asked one group of posters, demanding what they referred to as “equal treatment” for husbands-to-be. Another group of threads attempts to show how Haredi women now share more with their husbands than in previous generations, such as the thread about how involved husbands are in their wives’ technical practice of TH. The feminist view on this thread, however, might see it as indicative of just the opposite. A generation ago, women were taught that TH is a woman’s commandment, she is responsible for keeping her own calendar and strictures, and her husband must take his cue from her. Although some posters cite “sharing” of TH technical practice (such as keeping your wife’s menstrual calendar) as a sign of progress and closeness, from a different gendered perspective it can be viewed as an example of an anti-feminist trend of giving men power and influence over women’s lives in areas which were once solely women’s domains.<sup>85</sup>

These threads are often among the liveliest discussions on the various forums, with ongoing battles between the more MO and Haredi members over the importance of equality or lack thereof. It is difficult to determine whether either of the groups is influencing the other’s standpoint. But even among the Haredi posters there appears to be a lack of total agreement regarding women’s tasks. While one group of Haredi women state that it is a woman’s task to do her husband’s bidding, another equates a woman to the neck that ultimately determines the direction that the head turns. And although there are women who admit to being in abusive marriages, including in the intimate realm, large groups of other posters, both MO and Haredi, are quick to offer support, advice and state categorically that equality aside, a man is commanded to respect and honor his wife, which is the normative state in the Orthodox Jewish world.

- 6) **The Baal Teshuva Movement** - Another development affecting Orthodox Jewish society reflected on these forums is the growing movement of secular Jews returning to observant Jewish practice. The increasing numbers of *Ba'alei Teshuva* (BT) (returnees) from the mid 1960s onward may be seen as a response to the alienation and atomization of modern society and the search for spirituality. Official outreach movements were pivotal to the phenomenon, and played a central role in acquainting young secular Jews with their traditional heritage.<sup>86</sup> The first major outreach movement was initiated by the seventh Lubavitch Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, and this was followed by outreach movements supported by other Hassidic and MO groups. From the 1980s onward, men's yeshivas and girls' seminaries for BTs were a growing phenomenon in the world of religious Jewish education and could be found in Israel, Europe and the United States, and other locales where Jews resided.

The BTs, as they are known colloquially, are in many cases initially characterized by a combination of a burning fervor to practice their newly learned religious precepts but also a great degree of ignorance in matters of Jewish custom, law and practice as is seen in some of the intimate threads on the various forums. In time, as BTs gain knowledge of and experience in the Orthodox world, they merge with its members, often to the point of being unrecognizable as formerly secular Jews.<sup>87</sup> Despite the Jewish belief stating that "not even a truly righteous man (*zaddik*) can aspire to the place where those who have returned to the fold stand," in Haredi communities in particular and sometimes even in those involved with outreach, BTs are tacitly considered second class Jews in terms of matchmaking, and marriages between BTs and those religious from birth are not the norm.<sup>88</sup> This tendency is reflected in a number of polls and posts regarding questions such as "Would you let your child marry a BT or convert?" equating the two although they are separate categories with different halachic ramifications. The frustrations of BTs regarding this hesitancy are expressed on several of the forums, particularly that with many Lubavitch members, a group known for its intensive and extensive outreach activities.

Some BTs enrich their Orthodox communities with the knowledge and experience that they have brought with them from the secular and non-Jewish world. In the sphere of physical self, for example, they often add information on some of the forums regarding specific aspects of women's health such as the danger of certain STDs for frum women (if they marry a BT or someone who had previously been married to a BT). However, it is also common to find those who turn their back on that world with the same zeal that they show in their new religious practices.<sup>89</sup> This tendency is expressed by some of the posters on various OJW forums, originally from secular backgrounds, along with their frustration in not being fully accepted by their new religious communities.

Similar to many of the other trends mentioned, it appears that the forums serve two purposes with regard to the BT issue. Simultaneously with their acting as a venting arena for both new and veteran BTs, echoing their

frustrations in religious society, they are also a meeting place for Orthodox women of all backgrounds and one of the few places where religious young FFB (“frum from birth”) can learn more about the histories, inner lives and problems affecting BTs, from the BT point of view. By offering this possibility, the forums are fostering understanding and tolerance in the Orthodox Jewish community, something that has been said outright by FFB women posting on threads pertaining to BT issues. It is yet to be seen whether this phenomenon will have wider repercussions and concrete expression in the Orthodox and Haredi communities

- 7) **The Social Nature of Orthodox Communities** – Orthodox Jewish society is composed of close-knit groups with particular social and cultural characteristics.<sup>90</sup> The special nature of Orthodox Jewish communities fosters a sense of cohesion but can also serve as breeding grounds for gossip, lack of privacy, inquisitive, intrusive and meddling behavior, public censure and herd mentality. Rumor can easily become certainty, and tattle is often the step before scandal despite the numerous Biblical and Talmudic exhortations against idle gossip and slander.<sup>91</sup> These tendencies make virtual communities an outlet of growing importance for OJW, providing them with a safe arena in which they can vent, question and compare without ruining their good name or their siblings and children’s chances for a successful match. Internet forums are rapidly becoming a way of circumventing the existing physical Jewish communities, creating a parallel community in which one does not endanger one’s future in order to obtain something in the present.

The anonymous nature of Internet forums can be used when a poster has an embarrassing question, or one that would elicit ridicule, rebuke or censure if asked of family, neighbors or friends. This is often utilized on “physical self” threads which are among the most personal and intimate subjects discussed on the various forums. However, it can also be used as an outlet for unsociable behavior. It is known that common Internet behavior of flaming, trolling or even lurking often reach heights that would be completely unacceptable in face-to-face encounters. My survey of forums populated primarily by OJW shows that the cultural admonitions to refrain from immodest behavior (i.e. aggression, bashing, intimidation) under any and all circumstances, do not always achieve expression when Orthodox and Haredi women enter the virtual arena.

## Conclusions

In her study of newly Orthodox women and Hassidism, Debra Renee Kaufman states that gender scholars often adopt a post-modernist attitude towards Orthodox and Haredi women that belies the true nature of this group.<sup>92</sup> While charting and analyzing OJW forums I have tried to avoid this pitfall, delving instead into the history and changing nature of the women’s society in Orthodox communities.

Regarding this women's society, it appears that the Internet forums of OJW serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they echo and mirror major social, educational and religious trends affecting the Orthodox and Haredi Jewish communities today. On the other hand, they play a role in shaping and re-shaping these trends, which are dynamic in nature even though often slow in responding. By offering information, they counteract the influences of "educating to ignorance" which has permeated parts of ultra-Orthodox society. By allowing dissenting voices to be heard, albeit anonymously, they act as a safe arena in which posters can express their true personal and gendered selves. By enabling dissenting personal positions to be shared and known, they act as a subversive agent which can strengthen similar positions among those who are wavering or afraid to be an isolated minority. By acting as a meeting place for different groups of OJW who would have little chance of meeting in the normal world, they act to educate women from different Orthodox groups about each other's lifestyles and choices. On the individual level, these factors have a dynamic potential impact on the development of the Orthodox Jewish female self. On the communal level, they have the potential of slowly changing the form and nature of the Orthodox Jewish world. Through the prism of the physical self we have seen how these trends in Orthodox Jewish society can influence even the most intimate and personal of moments in a woman's life; through that same prism, we have seen how the dual role of these virtual communities can become a pivotal factor in shaping those same intimate moments in different ways, potentially leading to very different operative and integrative directions.

The circumscribed nature of this article in which I have concentrated solely on virtual discussions of the physical self on OJW forums has not allowed me to develop and analyze broader issues that are tangential to questions of physical self: for example, modesty, childrearing, emotional health and relationships. It is equally important to understand the virtual dynamics behind these forums: forum leaders, active members who develop extraordinary presence and power over a small group, forum addiction and forum nature. To what degree do they take the place of real communities and encourage members to distance themselves from face to face communication? Do these women fit existing hypotheses about the reasons people participate in virtual communities? These are all issues that I hope to develop elsewhere.

## Endnotes

- 1 Sara Ahmed, *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).
- 2 From the Yiddish, stemming from the German "fromm."
- 3 Debra R. Kaufman, "Engendering Orthodoxy: Newly Orthodox Women and Hasidism," in Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 152-3. See also: Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Pub., 1994); Menachem Friedman, "Kol Kvoda Bat Melech Hutza: Haisha Haharedit '" (All Honor of a King's Daughter Outward: The Haredi Woman") (Heb.), in: David Yoel Ariel, Maya Leibovitz, Yoram Mazor (eds.), *Baruch Shesani Isha: Haisha Beyahadut – Mehatanach Vead Yameinu*, (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, Sifrei Hemed, 1999), 189-205.
- 4 The Code of Jewish Law, compiled by the Sefaradi Jewish Rabbi Joseph Karo in the sixteenth century.
- 5 Adam S. Ferziger, *Exclusion and Hierarchy: Orthodoxy, Nonobservance, and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Identity* (U of Penn Press, 2005); William B. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry*, (New York: Free Press, 1982).
- 6 Simeon D. Baumel, *Sacred Speakers: Language and Culture among the Haredim in Israel* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006); Samuel C. Heilman, "The Many Faces of Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* (2: 1 1982), 23-51.
- 7 Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim," in: Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 197-264; Michael K. Silber, "The emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: the invention of a tradition" in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York: JTS, 1992), 23-84. Studies from the early 1990s referred to approximately 550,000 Haredi Jews, about half of whom lived in Israel. Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1992).
- 8 Hassidim follow the teachings of R. Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov – Master of the Good name -- (1700-1760) and are divided into different dynastic groups known as "courts," each headed by its own Rebbe (Hassidic rabbi) and following its own customs. Naftali Loewenthal, "Hasidism, Mysticism and Reality," *The Jewish Quarterly* (153 Spring 1994), 52-53; Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism in Modern Society," in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (NY and London: NYU Press, 1991), 511-531.
- 9 The Lithuanians, or Misnagdim (opponents), were known as such because their major characteristic as a group was their opposition of Hassidism. The major historical opponent to the Hassidic movement was R. Elijah B. Solomon Zalman, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), and his followers' way of life became characteristic of much of Lithuanian Jewry. Mordecai L. Wilensky, "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: The Hostile Phase," in: *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, 244-271.
- 10 During the early 1980s the Sefaradi Haredi "Shas" Movement, headed by former Israeli Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, formed a powerful political and educational establishment in Israel, encouraging large groups of Sefaradim throughout the world to form a Sefaradi Haredi subculture of their own. Anat Feldman, *Gormim Betzmichat Miflaga Hadasha: Hitachdut Hasfaradim Shomrei Tora (Tenuat Shas) (Causes for the Development of a New Political Party: The Sefaradi Torah Guardians (Shas Movement)* (Heb.), (Ph.D. Dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 2001); Aaron P. Willis, *Sephardic Torah Guardians": Ritual and the Politics of Piety* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1993); Nissim Leon, "Ma Shem Yikarei Letofaa She'ein Yodeia Mi Kava Ota Vilama?" *Leshe'elat Mekoroteha Shel Hatenuah Haharedit Bikerev Hamizrachim*" *Iyunim Bitkumat Yisrael* (16 2004), 85-107.
- 11 Menachem Friedman, *HaChevra HaCharedit-Mekorot, Megamot Vetahalichim* (Charedi Society – Sources, Trends and Processes) (Heb.), (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim Liheker Yisrael, 1991); Yair Sheleg, *HaDat'im haHadashim: Mabat achshavi al haHevra haDatit b'Yisrael* (The new religious Jews: recent developments among observant Jews in Israel) (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000).

- 12 This issue has long been under debate both among Haredi leaders and in the Haredi press. See: Rabbi Leib Kelemen, "Rethinking "kosher" Videos and computer games," *The Jewish Observer* (35: 7 Sept. 2002), 39-40; Dr. Bernard Fryshman, "Digressing on the Internet," *The Jewish Observer* (35: 7 Sept 2002), 40-42.
- 13 Yitzchok Adlerstein, "The Electronic Maakeh: Can Technology Make Our Internet Safer?" *The Jewish Observer* (36: 9 Cheshvan 5763/nov. 2003), 26; Rabbi Aaron Twerski, "A Ubiquitous Challenge: An Insidious Trap," *The Jewish Observer* (36: 9 Cheshvan 5763/nov. 2003), 14-15; Edward Portnoy, "Haredim and the Internet," 2004, <http://modiya.nyu.edu/handle/1964/265>.
- 14 The earliest such forums began in 1996 as MUDs (Multi User Domains) and have developed since that time into their present form Adam N. Joinson, *Understanding the Psychology of Internet Behavior: Virtual Worlds, Real Lives* (NY, Palgrave Macmillan 2003), 43-159; Yair Amichai-Hamburger (ed.), *The Social Net: Human Behavior in Cyberspace* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005); Magid Igbaria, Conrad Shayo, Lorne Olfman, "Virtual Societies: Their Prospects and Dilemmas," in: Jayne Gackenbach (ed.), *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal implications*, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 227-252.
- 15 Kimmy Kaplan and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *Haredim Yisraelim: Hishtalvut Lelo Temia?* (Israeli Haredim: Integration without Assimilation?) (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Van Leer and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003); Kimmy Kaplan, Besod Hasiach Haharedi, (Jerusalem: Mercas Shazar, 2007); Heilman and Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews," 197-264.
- 16 Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).
- 17 Sydney Shoemaker, *Self-knowledge and Self-identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 22-25; Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: U of Cal Press, 1978), 150; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 18 Werner J Severin and James W. Tankard, James W., Jr., *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, Uses* (New York: Hastings House, 1979).
- 19 Helen Gouldner and Mary S. Strong, *Speaking of Friendship: Middle Class Women and Their Friends* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).
- 20 Janes Morahan-Martin, "Males, Females, and the Internet" in: Jayne Gackenbach (ed.), *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal implication*, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 169-197.
- 21 Elizabeth Reid, "The Self and the Internet: Variations on the Illusion of One Self," in: Gackenbach, *Psychology and the Internet*, 29-42; Carlo Gabriel Porto Bellini and Lilia Maria Vargas, "Rationale for Internet-Mediated Communities," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* (6: 1 2003), 3-14; Hsiu-Fen Lin, "Understanding Behavioral Intention to Participate in Virtual Communities" *CyberPsychology & Behavior* (9: 5 2006), 540-547; Azy Barak and Oril Gluck-Ofri, "Degree and Reciprocity of Self-Disclosure in Online Forums," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 407-417.
- 22 [www.mikolot.mayimrabim.com](http://www.mikolot.mayimrabim.com) (March 9, 2008).
- 23 On another site that she started, she charts her personal history and connection with this forum. [www.devarim.com](http://www.devarim.com) (Feb. 8, 2008).
- 24 All statistics for Internet forums in this section are from February 10, 2008 unless stated otherwise.
- 25 [www.frumarrieds.byethost12.com](http://www.frumarrieds.byethost12.com)
- 26 As of mid February 2008, out of 150 threads in the "Intimacy" section on this forum, 57, or over a third, had been locked and numerous threads had been deleted by the moderators.
- 27 [www.imamother.com](http://www.imamother.com) (March 9, 2008).
- 28 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Yossic> (Feb. 19, 2008).
- 29 <http://z15.invisionfree.com/BTDT/index.php?act=idx>
- 30 [http://leiner.spaces.live.com/PersonalSpace.aspx?\\_c01\\_blogpart=](http://leiner.spaces.live.com/PersonalSpace.aspx?_c01_blogpart=)
- 31 <http://z15.invisionfree.com/BTDT/index.php?act=boardrules> (March 7, 2008).
- 32 [http://s9.invisionfree.com/Jewish\\_Womens\\_Forum/](http://s9.invisionfree.com/Jewish_Womens_Forum/)
- 33 <http://web.mac.com/zuncompany/>
- 34 [www.chabadtalk.com/forum](http://www.chabadtalk.com/forum)
- 35 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EshetChayil> ; <http://groups.yahoo.com/group.TishaKabin>
- 36 [www.calmkallahs.com](http://www.calmkallahs.com)
- 37 [www.hashkafa.com](http://www.hashkafa.com)

- 38 Christine Rosen, "Standing Athwart E-History," *The New York Sun* (Feb. 12, 2008, [www.nysun.com/pf.php?id=71165&v=1934043021](http://www.nysun.com/pf.php?id=71165&v=1934043021)).
- 39 Lee Siegel, *Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob* (Spiegel and Grau, 2008).
- 40 [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/modernorthodoxwomen](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/modernorthodoxwomen)
- 41 From the Hebrew, literally "time period." The commandment of onah is the obligation of a man to provide conjugal rights to his wife under Jewish law.
- 42 John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Separation – anger and anxiety* (vol 2, London: Pimlico, 1998), 411-419; See also Cindy Hazan and Phillip R. Shaver, "Romantic Love, Conceptualized as an Attachment Process," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (52,1987), 511-524.
- 43 Mark D. Oleson, *Adolescents' Recollection of Early Physical Contact: Implications for Attachment and Intimacy* (Dissertation.com, June 1998), 28.
- 44 Christine Akieting, *Body Language – the Ten Stages of Physical Intimacy*, (<http://ezinearticles.com/?Body-Language---Ten-Stages-of-Physical-Intimacy&id=260854>, March 5, 2008).
- 45 D.S. Ribner, "Determinants of the Intimate lives of Haredi (Ultra Orthodox) Jewish Couples," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* (18: 1 2003), 53-62.
- 46 Preparatory classes are given to brides in order to familiarize them with the laws of TH before marriage. They range from one to ten or more meetings, and are either given individually or in groups.
- 47 For example, Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life* (New York: Feldheim, 1974); Rachel Wasserfall, (ed.), *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1999).
- 48 Tamar El-Or, Educated and Ignorant: *Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and their World* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994).
- 49 See, for example, the story of the Haredi bungalow colony in upstate NY that sold baseball caps to Haredi men and boys on vacation. One of the best-selling caps carried the slogan: "I keep humrot which you haven't even heard of!" *Sacred Speakers*, 164.
- 50 These include praying on the 24<sup>th</sup> of Tevet, the anniversary of the death of Miriyam Hakoveset (Miriam the washerwoman), baking challah with special prayers for infertile women, being a godmother at a circumcision, providing drinks in Meron (Israel) for celebrants at the Lag Baomer festival, and eating a piece of cake from a circumcision ceremony.
- 51 Shia Markowitz, "Genetic Testing: A Blessing or a Curse?" *The Jewish Observer* (38: 6 summer 2005), 16-21.
- 52 H. personal correspondence with the author, Oct. 18, 2007.
- 53 During the twelve days or more each month when a fertile woman is niddah, a couple is forbidden to sleep in the same bed. Orthodox Jewish couples either use twin beds or one partner sleeps on a separate sofa or pull-out mattress during the days in question.
- 54 On this board 17 out of 50 threads in the "intimate" section dealing with various forms of this question were locked over an eight month period.
- 55 Regarding the usage of the term see: Mary Ellen Mazey, David R. Lee (eds.), *Her Space, Her Place: A Geography of Women* (Washington: Association of American Geographers, 1983); Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson (eds.), *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).
- 56 S. personal correspondence with author, March 6, 2008.
- 57 On the history of the Shtetl, see: Mark Zborowsky and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: the Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1952).
- 58 Recently a plethora of right-wing Orthodox and Haredi literature has been published on the subject of "Shana Rishona" and dealing with the initial tensions of marriage, pointing to a growing need for literature on this subject in those communities, in which the divorce rate is rapidly rising. See: Eliyohu Goldschmidt, *Dear Son: A father's wise guidance for wholesome human relationships, a happy marriage and a serene home* (NY: Mesorah, 2004); Abraham J. Twersky, *The First Year of Marriage* (NY: Mesorah, 2004); Simcha Cohen, *What Did You Say? Making Yourself Understood in Marriage, a Jewish Perspective* (n,p); Simcha Cohen, 2000; *Meir Wikler, Ten Minutes a Day to a Better Marriage* (NY: Mesorah, 2003); Rabbi Mordechai Bisser, "How to improve your marriage," *The Jewish Observer* (38: 3 March 2005), 32-38.
- 59 In the Ashkenazi Jewish wedding ceremony the newly married couple publicly seclude themselves enter after the marriage ceremony, under the gaze of two witnesses, symbolizing the consummation of their marriage, although in practice it is rarely carried out in that room.

- 60 Shtup - Yiddish for "to shove", used as slang for intercourse.
- 61 Haim Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy," *Tradition* (28: 4 1994), 67; Heilman and Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim," 197-264.
- 62 Benny Brown, "Hachmara: Hamisha Tipusim Min Ha'et Hahadasha" ("Stringency: Five Types from the Modern Period"), in: Aryeh Edri (ed.), *Iyunei Halacha Umishpat Lichvod Prof. Aharon Kirschenbaum* (Tel-Aviv: Tel Aviv University and Touro College, NY, 2001), 123-237.
- 63 See, for example, the opinions of Rabbi Yitzhok Hutner, member Agudath Israel of America and the council of Torah sages, in *The Jewish Observer* devoted to the issue of "Hurban Europa," (Cheshvan 5739, November 1978).
- 64 S. Personal correspondence with author, March 9, 2008; Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, "Totally Engrossed: Extreme Piousness or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder," *The Jewish Observer* (37: 9 Nov 2004), 23-28.
- 65 One of the most widely followed and disseminated publications dealing with that issue and making those claims is that of Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk, of Gateshead England. See: Oz Vehadar Levusha – *Modesty, an Adornment Life* (New York and Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1998). There is even a women's Internet free home study program based on the book that details the minutiae of modest dress for women from collarbone to ankles.
- 66 Brown, "Hachmara," 232.
- 67 For example, F. Personal correspondence with author, Dec. 20, 2007.
- 68 EY Personal correspondence with author, Nov. 29, 2007.
- 69 Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- 70 Kate Miriam Loewenthal, "Haredi women, Haredi men, stress and distress," *Israel Journal of Psychiatry* (35: 3 1998), 217-224.
- 71 Reid, "The Self and the Internet," 38.
- 72 Rachel Mankin, "'Mashehu Hadash Ligamrei': Hitpathutu shel ra'ayon hahinuh hadati levannot baet hahadasha" ("'Something Totally New': The Development of the Idea of Religious Education for Girls in the Modern Era,") *Masekhet B* (2003/04), 63-85.
- 73 Deborah R. Weissman, "Bais Ya'akov as an innovation in Jewish Women's Education: a contribution to the study of education and social change," *Studies in Jewish Education* 7 (1995), 278-299.
- 74 El-OR, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World*. See in comparison her study of MO women: Tamar El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know more: Literacy and Identity among Young Orthodox Women in Israel* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002).
- 75 Hanan A. Alexander, "Jewish Education in extremis: a prolegomenon to postmodern Jewish educational thought," *Religious Jewish Education* (98: 4 2003), 471-493.
- 76 Iris Parush, *Nashim Korot: Yitrona Shel Shuliyut Bahevra Hayuehudit Bemizrakh Eiropa Bamea Hatsha Esreh (Literary Women: The Advantage of Apprenticeship in Jewish Society in Eastern Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century)* (Tel-Aviv: Sidrat Ofakim, Am Oved, 2001).
- 77 *Sacred Speakers*, 67-72.
- 78 Samuel David Kassow, "The Shtetl in Interwar Poland," in: Steven Katz (ed.), *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 121-139.; Marcos Zilber, "Ruling Practices and multiple cultures: Jews, Poles, and Germans in Lodz during WWI," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 5 (2006), 189-208.
- 79 Menachem Friedman "The Lost "Kiddush" Cup: Changes in Ashkenazic Haredi Culture - a Tradition in Crisis," in: Jack Wertheimer, (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish continuity in the Modern Era* (New York: JTS, 1992), 175-186.
- 80 Debra R. Kaufman, "Engendering orthodoxy: newly orthodox women and Hasidism," in Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 152.
- 81 Tamar El-Or, "Visibility and Possibilities: ultraorthodox Jewish women between the domestic and public spheres," *Women's Studies International Forum* (20: 5-6 1997), 665-673. This process is similar to those in many nationalist and developing societies. See: Nira Yuval-Davis & Flora Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State* (Houndmills & London 1989).
- 82 Yitzhak Berger, *The Orthodox Jewish Woman: A Study of Cultural Conflict and Psychological Distress* (Dissertation, NYU, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1991).
- 83 JOFA was founded in 1997 by Blu Greenberg as an organization that would celebrate Jewish women's leadership and later promote events and provide speakers on this subject. [http:](http://)

- [//www.jofa.org/about.php/who/history](http://www.jofa.org/about.php/who/history). Kolech was founded in 1998 by Chana Kehat as an organization of Jewish women devoted to "halacha, tradition, and gender equality." [www.kolech.org.il/show.asp?id=13087](http://www.kolech.org.il/show.asp?id=13087) (March 6, 2008).
- 84 John Sullivan, "Grand rebbe issues new wedding laws," *Times-Herald Record* (March 11, 2008). <http://recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080215/NEWS/802150349/-1/COMM02>; Wedding and sumptuary laws are a great issue of debate in Haredi society. See: Prof. Aaron Twersky, "Reflections on Guidelines for weddings," *The Jewish Observer* (35: 6 June 2002), 10-15.
- 85 Tamar El-Or, "The Length of the Slits and the Spread of Luxury: Reconstructing the subordination of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women through the patriarchy of men scholars," *Sex Roles* (29: 9-10 1993), 585-598.
- 86 M. Herbert Danziger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989); Lynn Davidman, *Strength of Tradition in a Chaotic World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Ann Arbor, UMI 1986).
- 87 Moshe Weinberger, "The Baal Teshuva in the Jewish Community: Re-entry problems," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* (12 1986), 69-125.
- 88 Debra Renee Kaufman, "Patriarchal Women: A case study of newly orthodox Jewish women," *Symbolic Interaction* (12,2 1989), 299-314; Reader's Forum, "The World of the Ba'al Teshuva," *The Jewish Observer* (35: 5 May 2002), 34; Yitzchak Schwartz, "Kol Yisroel Areivim: The Kiruv Imperative," *The Jewish Observer* (35: 5 May 2002), 23-28; Yitzchok Lowenbraun, "Kiruv Today, now or never," *The Jewish Observer* (36: 1 Jan. 2003), 4-9; Chana Nestlebaum, "Kiruv, and then what?," *The Jewish Observer* (36: 8 Oct. 2003), 18-22.
- 89 Debra Renee Kaufman, "Experiencing Hasidism: newly orthodox women's perspectives on sexuality and domesticity," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* (12, 1-2 1990), 204.
- 90 One of the less obvious but extremely prevalent qualities is the social fostering of a constant state of guilt. See: Shira Frank, "Guilt, A Positive Factor in Teshuva," *The Jewish Observer* (36: 7 Sept 2003), 34-37.
- 91 Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).
- 92 Kaufman, "Engendering Orthodoxy," 152.