

Between Letter and Spirit: The Ontology of Jewish Performance

Shira Schwartz

A dissertation submitted to  
the faculty of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Theatre and Performance Studies

York University

Toronto, Ontario

January 2021

©Shira Schwartz, 2021

## Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic study that focuses on the discursive, gestural rituals and performance practices in the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto, Canada over the last decade. It explores how the written law factors into an oral tradition, a script not passed on by bodily surrogation alone but in the form of guidebooks, performance manuals and legal texts. We have learned from Judith Butler and others how we perform cultural and ideological scripts; performance theory has taught us how scripts are passed down generationally through oral traditions and the repertoire. Diana Taylor's book *The Archive and the Repertoire* argues the vital role of performance –gesture, spoken word, movement, song, dance, etc.– in storing and transmitting cultural knowledge. What distinguishes this methodology from Taylor's and others' is that it asks how does performance differ in a cultural context where those performance scripts are not implicit, but written? In this project I focus on the scripts central to the religious and cultural life in orthodox Judaism. Indeed, these prescriptions seem to compel their own transgression. The script *and* the performance are passed down, and what results is a sort of contest between them. This dissertation argues that the archive and the repertoire were never meant to line up – that their efficacy relies precisely on their mutual disconnect. With disidentification as a major theme and throughline, I look at various sites of more progressive enactments of orthodoxy in orthodox communities, which, in some cases, include overt subversions. These phenomena are not a turning away from orthodoxy but rather a recreating of customs often characterized as orthodox, like intricate rituals relating to modesty, clothing, the body, family relationships, dating and marriage, and elaborate Passover preparations, which construct new avenues for embodied performance, mindful enactments, and community formation. In this dissertation, I present material gathered from interviews with men and women between the ages of 20-39 who identify as orthodox and live in Toronto, as well as share my own experiences as part of their community. I pose the questions: How are identities formed and agencies acquired through failing to meet a standard or perfectly match a picture? How does this Sisyphean process of striving for the impossible, in the words of Haym Soloveitchik, produce music that is “better than it can be played”? (73)

## Dedication

*To my parents*

## Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest *Hakarat Hatov*, gratitude, to Laura Levin, my supervisor. I feel extremely blessed to have her as my mentor. I remember our very first meeting together to discuss the subject of a major research paper for my Master's, the first iteration of this project. I told her I wanted to write about *A Doll House* by Henrik Ibsen. "OK..." she said, and pointed to her bookshelf. "But Shira, are you sure you want to be one of fifty people on my shelf who have written about *A Doll House*? Why don't you write about something that really means something to you?" Had I been truly passionate about that topic, I know Laura would have approved, but she knew me and intuited more. I made the hard but better choice that day, and ever since Laura has encouraged me to go further. She has taught me the art of interdisciplinarity – the value of embracing messy ideas and the discipline to work through them. It hasn't always been easy for me, but she has supported me at every turn. She has guided me, read my countless drafts, and talked things out with me at every juncture of this long and winding road. Laura is extraordinarily gifted and it is an honour to learn from her, which I do every single time we interact. She has spent so much time and energy on me and this project, and for that I am forever thankful.

Darren Gobert has made a profound impact on me and this project over the course of the ten years that we have worked together. I don't know if anyone has invested more time, sweat, and effort into providing critical guidance to me and feedback on my ideas. Draft after draft of this dissertation he has pored over, writing tens of pages of thoughtfully articulated notes and insights. We have shared many laughs and even more invaluable conversations. I have held onto these formative moments in my subsequent scholarly endeavours, professional pursuits, and in my journey through life. Darren has challenged me, and it has made my work better. I am forever grateful for the paradigmatic shifts in my worldview that have occurred in my knowing Darren and for the wisdom I have gained from his mentorship.

Belarie Hyman Zatzman has been a role model for me since I was eight years old and learned that she was pursuing a PhD in Theatre. It was fortuitous that we met through our community so many years ago and divine intervention that we reconnected at York University in my adult years. Belarie has been with me since day one, coaching me through the murky waters of auto-ethnography, and listening to my journey in Judaism. I have tremendous respect for her as a teacher, scholar, and human being. I cherish our relationship as well as her significant contributions to this work.

I want to extend a note of sincere thanks to Marcia Blumberg, who graciously agreed to join my doctoral committee at the last minute. Marcia committed her time to reading this work and to providing valuable comments, for which I am so appreciative. Her passion, rigour, and personal dedication have inspired me greatly in the final stages of this dissertation process.

I acknowledge the extraordinary individuals in my community who agreed to participate in this study, without whom this project would not have been possible. They shared their personal thoughts, perspectives, and religious practices with me, and I thank each and every one of them for their contributions.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my incredible friends, Brauna, Mer, Keren, Bailey, Tanya, Sarah, Chaya, Mable, Orit, Zvi and Michelle, Julie and Aaron, Phil and Deb, Jacoby, Dani, Kim, Ilana, Shifra, Bina, Deena, Danielle, Claire, Naomi, Rachel, and Eliana, who have lived in and through these pages with me. Not only have they picked me up when I was down, but they raise me up at every crossroad. They are my lifeline.

I honour my exceptional siblings who have always been genuinely interested in this work. I thank my sisters, Elana and Naomi, my brother, Moshe, and my extended siblings, Shmuli, Ryan, and Maya, for teaching me what it means to be truly religious from the inside out (and the outside in), for their endless support, and for their spectacular children – Dov Ber, Masha Miriam, Chayim Yehuda, Baila Sara, Tzvi Meir, Efraim Noach, Uri Simcha, Chaim Zev, Ari, Kayla, Sari, Hadas, Noa, and Binah – who I love with all my heart!

In the speech that my father gave at my wedding to my now ex-husband, he said that he admired my ability “to gracefully negotiate two apparently disparate lives – that of the theatre and of Judaism – and to channel them into the noblest of endeavours: intellectually honest inquiry and education.” Can I ever live up to this intention? With this dissertation I have tried, and I pray for the strength to continue this mission. I learn the value of criticality from my mother (who, ironically, has never criticized another human being in her life) who studies the Torah and asks questions, always with humility and respect. My parents are *Tzaddikim*, righteous people, who learned greatness from their parents, Grammy Sara and Grampa Hy, Bubby Lyla, and Zaidy Frank. Their infinite support and love for me has made this project possible.

I also acknowledge Nesanel, with whom I have had the deepest learning, and who has always believed in me, even in the darkest time.

Finally, I thank Hashem, for absolutely everything.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Opening Quotations.....	1
Chapter One.....	2
Performing Jewishness.....	2
Methodology.....	9
Context.....	19
Project Description and Research Objectives.....	27
Literature.....	30
Overview.....	37
Chapter Two.....	44
Performing Jewish Sexuality: <i>Mikveh</i> Spaces in Orthodox Jewish Publics.....	44
<i>Niddah</i> .....	47
Historical Context.....	60
<i>Mikveh</i> Ritual: An Overview.....	62
A Woman's <i>Daf</i> (Page).....	67
<i>Mikveh</i> : A Production.....	74
God is in the Details.....	78
Mindfulness and Criticality.....	86

Shoshana.....	86
Leah.....	90
Sexual Consciousness.....	93
Public, Space, and Discourse.....	102
Gaby.....	111
Maayan.....	113
Talking Sex.....	117
Chapter Three.....	123
Passover Objects: How to Be/have Them.....	123
Performing Objects: An Overview.....	124
Performing <i>Chametz</i> : Searching and Purging.....	126
Performing Expulsion: Women and Checking.....	137
Shaindy.....	137
Nechama.....	141
Matzah: <i>Chametz</i> 's Double.....	144
Chapter Four.....	152
Turn it Over, Turn it Over: Masculinity and <i>Dreidlich</i> in Orthodox Dress.....	152
“On Account of a Hat”: a synopsis of a short story by Sholom Aleichem.....	152
Introduction.....	153
Historical Context.....	172
Setting the Stage: <i>Tzitzit</i> and <i>Shatnez</i> .....	178
Performing <i>Dreidlich</i> .....	183

Yoav.....	187
Aiden.....	189
Mendel.....	192
To Assimilate and Self-protect.....	195
Chapter Five.....	204
The <i>Shidduch</i> Crisis: Marriage and Failure in Orthodox Toronto.....	204
Marriage and Divorce in Jewish Law.....	210
Context: The <i>Shidduch</i> Crisis.....	214
A Feminist Failing.....	229
Liat.....	231
Shayna.....	232
Libby.....	238
Rebecca.....	245
In Spite of, In-Between, and Through.....	248
Conclusion.....	251
Works Cited.....	257
Appendix: List of Open Questions.....	265

*A tireless quest for absolute accuracy, for “perfect fit”—faultless congruence between conception and performance—is the hallmark of contemporary religiosity. The search is dedicated and unremitting; yet it invariably falls short of success. For spiritual life is an attempt, as a great pianist once put it, to play music that is better than it can be played. This Sisyphean spirituality will never wholly disappear, for there will always be those who hear the written notes and who find in absolute fidelity the most sublime freedom.*

- Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik

*There is fiction in the space between  
the lines on your page of memories  
write it down but it doesn't mean  
you're not just telling stories...*

- Tracy Chapman

## Chapter One: Performing Jewishness

I am an orthodox Jewish woman. When I was nineteen, I began the process of orthodox dating for marriage. There was so much to learn – so many details, so many laws – and the nuances seemed impenetrable.

I have two sisters who are older than me and attended an orthodox high school; I, alternatively, attended a community Jewish high school, which included practically no education in orthodoxy. From my sisters' example, I was easily able to mirror behaviour. I also had instruction manuals to turn to. More accessible than Talmudic law (I don't speak Aramaic) were etiquette texts printed by multiple Jewish publishers and written in English for contemporary audiences. These materials cite, explain, interpret, explicate, and elaborate Talmudic laws, including those of courtship and modes of dress. It was in relation to clothing that I became (differently) conscious of how I was being perceived as a potential Jewish partner. I also began to realize how orthodox Jewish culture is obsessed with performance.

But my performance education began even earlier, in my teenage years, when I made a choice to start dressing, and behaving, orthodoxly. I gave away my jeans, bought an Artscroll *siddur* (prayer book), and started thinking about what these objects meant to me and how I related to the Torah and God.

I am now in my mid-thirties. I have acquired around twenty years of what I would call an education in performing orthodoxy. As a performance studies student, I do not use the term 'performance' lightly. I view performance as an epistemology, a methodology, a deep knowing, and a learning of the highest order. Performance is where the internal and the external meet (or don't) and where the body and soul connect (or diverge). Performance is the fruit of a marriage between knowledge and practice. I possess and continue to gain a 'performance education' in

orthodox womanhood. This education includes ritual, Torah learning, and a study on how to pass as orthodox within the Jewish community in Toronto in which I am situated.

I still haven't learned to dress orthodoxly or to perform the role of the single Jewish woman. What I have learned is how to fail. As a researcher, I am interested in the question of what failure means from the viewpoint of Jewish identity. Two decades of ritual-performance anxiety has drawn me to the project of exploring orthodox performance as impossible. How can the impossibility of Jewish law render it meaningful? In this dissertation I reflect on my own experiences, as well as present data from interviews with other orthodox Jewish men and women, many of whom have been through the wringer and have emerged triumphantly; they have found strength in their hardships and suffering and have transformed that pain into identity. I have observed how many of these individuals have grappled and have been ostracized, and I see the extraordinary choices they have made and the spaces they have created for themselves. I have witnessed their creativity in resignifying and hypertheatricalizing orthodox tradition, and their willingness to own and at the same time subvert the roles that they inhabit.

I am extremely interested in looking at sites of more progressive enactments of orthodoxy that I am already seeing in orthodox communities, which, in some cases, include overt subversions. The phenomenon of this particular strand of disidentification is not a turning away from orthodoxy but rather a recreating of customs often characterized as orthodox, like intricate rituals relating to the modesty, clothing, the body, family relationships, dating and marriage, and elaborate Passover preparations. It is, as Laura Levin says, "the arguing over the Exodus while conducting a Passover *Seder*; the pulling apart of a practice while in the midst of its performance, the very tradition that produces its dissection" (Levin, Interview, November 2013). In this dissertation I pose the questions, How are identities formed and agencies acquired through

failing to meet a standard or perfectly match a picture? And how does this Sisyphean process of striving for the impossible, in the words of Soloveitchik, play music “that is better than it can be played”? (73).

One of the major concepts in this dissertation is agency, specifically, how it is exercised through performance, involving action and intentionality. In the pages that follow, I will often speak about the relationship between agency, resistance, and in some cases, passive enactment of orthodox Jewish law. Often there is overlap between quotidian, habitual action and agential, intentionally performed ritual. However the boundaries between different modes of enactment in orthodox Jewish practice are not always clear. A *bedikah* (vaginal check), for example, is a highly regulated ritualized action performed by married orthodox Jewish women which, ninety percent of the time, might be performed passively without incident; however, the other ten percent of the time (and it is usually higher than that), the *bedikah* might be considered “questionable,” according to orthodox Jewish law, and in that moment the ritual “suddenly become[s] a thing that has leaped up and asserted itself, a thing that demands to be reckoned with” (Bernstein 74). In such a case, the subject has a choice to start the ritual over, which would set forth a new slew of intricate, standardized practices, or to do nothing at all, which in this instance, would constitute a kind of resistance. Both actions are forms of agency insofar as they impel a freedom to choose.

This dissertation is highly influenced by Saba Mahmood’s writing on women’s agency within the mosque movements. Mahmood argues that agency resides within existing power structures (8), not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple [acts that] inhabit norms” (15). Orit Avishai’s article “‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World” extends Mahmood’s theories in a significant way by applying her reading of agency to a study that examines

transformations in Israeli Jewish orthodoxy, specifically relating to the regulation of sexuality through laws around menstruation. In her paper, Avishai demonstrates that women “are not passive targets of religious discourse (“doormats”), or strategic agents whose observance serves extra-religious ends” (410). Rather, she argues, “observance is best explained by the notion of religious conduct as a mode of being, a performance of religious identity, or a path to achieving orthodox subjecthood.” Avishai points out that studies of women in conservative religions often “juxtapose agency and complicity”; she draws attention to a paradigmatic problem with the “paradox” mentality, which assumes that “agency and religious adherence” are incongruent. Like Mahmood, Avishai locates agency *in* observance. Rather than asking “why women comply,” she analyzes how “religious women articulate and perform observance” (410).

I have used Mahmood and Avishai’s notion of agency as an core principle throughout this project, for which my primary methodologies are performance, ethnography, and auto-ethnography. For this research, I interviewed individuals in the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto and offer my perspective as one of its members. Underpinning this fieldwork is an argument about the letter of Jewish law and the spirit behind it. I assert that between the letter or the scripture or corpus of Jewish law (biblical and Talmudic texts) and the spirit of it (ideas, images, and even hopes and dreams about and around the Torah, belonging to the practitioners of its law) are etiquette texts and behavioural directives, books and articles written to explicate the performance of law. Because of the sheer volume of these materials, it is impossible to get it ‘exactly right.’ Yet, in the midst of this messy, complicated negotiation of etiquette laws and *halacha* (Jewish legal) directives is where something extraordinary occurs – where publics and counter-publics are formed, where sex is talked about and sexuality is voiced, where women engage with Torah via the home and critical scholarship and assert authority, and where men

engage with their Judaism via their clothing and assert individuality. It is a central site of meaning-making, intentionality, and consciousness, where the law actually begins to make sense. It is where communities are established, where women and men articulate agency, and where the law becomes personal.

My project focuses on the “in-between”: the place between the written text and the abstract theory (or spirit) of the law. I am influenced by Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of the “mythic realm” (also known as the “monstrous interval”). In his essay, “Reality and Its Shadow,” he argues that the image is a myth: it exists in the interval and is a suspension of time – what he calls, “the meanwhile” – which is between creation and becoming (Levinas 92). This study’s notion of the “in between” differs from Levinas’s “meanwhile,” however, as he believes living in the meanwhile to be a horror. He argues that the meanwhile “does not have the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming, in which it can end and be surpassed” (Schmitz and Feur 141). The in-between, as understood here, *does* possess a redemptive quality. But perhaps this study shares some of the horror that Levinas describes – not in a lifeless way, but in a Kierkegaardian “fear and trembling” kind of way. Perhaps the voices in this study, situated between the law and its ideal, are sensitive to the “deep humanity” symbolized by Kierkegaard’s “true knight of faith” (12). In an orthodox Jewish context, the space is actualized through highly performative and specialized rituals of action.

My study looks at discursive, gestural rituals, and performance practices in the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto, Canada, over the last decade, constructing an argument about a particularly contextualized in-between having to do with orthodox Jewish law; that is, the written law factors into an oral tradition, a script not passed on by bodily surrogation alone but in the form of guidebooks, performance manuals, and legal texts. We have learned from Judith Butler

and others how we perform cultural and ideological scripts; performance theory has taught us how scripts are passed down generationally through oral traditions and the repertoire. Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* argues the vital role of performance – gesture, spoken word, movement, song, dance, etc. – in storing and transmitting cultural knowledge. What distinguishes the methodology used here from that of Taylor and others is that it asks the question, How does performance differ in a cultural context where performance scripts are not implicit, but written? My project focusses on the scripts central to the religious and cultural life of Judaism. Indeed, these prescriptions seem to compel their own transgression. The script *and* the performance are passed down, and what results is a sort of contest between them. I argue that the archive and the repertoire were never meant to line up – that their efficacy relies precisely on their mutual disconnect.

Disidentification is a major throughline in this dissertation. In the pages that follow I look at sites of progressive enactments; rather than running away from orthodoxy or rejecting the rigidity of its structure – by, say, eating pork or breaking Shabbat [Sabbath], or other acts of counteridentification – the performance practices I analyse in this study are enacted as modes of both identification and critique. Whether it be the laws of *niddah*, the Passover *Seder*, or the clothes and head-coverings that men and women wear, the individuals in this ethnography question, critique, test out and experiment with the very laws they are enacting. José Esteban Muñoz calls this disidentification in his book, *Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*, stating that disidentification is enacted by someone who “is neither the ‘Good Subject,’ who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, or the ‘Bad Subject,’ who imagines herself outside of ideology. A ‘disidentificatory subject’” tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form” (12).

In one case that I discuss, a newly divorced orthodox woman chooses to continue to cover her hair after she is no longer married, something that many divorced women in her community choose to do. However, the *tichel* (headscarf) she dons is far from inconspicuous; draped in multi-coloured fabrics and bejewelled tassels, her headcovering is more decked out after her divorce than it was while she was still married. This woman takes a ritual typically performed by married women and, upon her divorce, literally spins it on its (and her) head. Her *tichel* is an act of criticality: it isn't a straightforward enactment of orthodox law (like Muñoz's Good Subject) nor is she giving orthodoxy the finger (like Muñoz's Bad Subject). It isn't a turning away from orthodoxy but rather a conscious subversion of it from within its regulatory system of practice.

There is a story in the Talmud of “the oven of Achnai” (*Bava Metzia* 59a-b), in which several rabbis debate whether a certain type of cement for an oven is considered kosher. Rabbi Eliezer is correct, according to *halacha* (Jewish law), but he is in the minority, and so he calls out, “If the *halacha* is in accordance with my opinion, let this carob tree prove it!” Suddenly, the carob tree leaps up – not only that, but a river changes direction, and even the walls of the *Bais Midrash* begin to collapse. Still his colleagues are not convinced, so he addresses the heavens for assistance. The voice of God Himself affirms that Rabbi Eliezer is correct. At this point, Rabbi Yehoshua intervenes and quotes the famous words: “*Lo bashamayim hi*,” “It [the Torah] is not in the heavens” (Deuteronomy 30:12). The lesson from this story is that once the Torah has been given, it is the job of the people to interpret its law. This is a governing principle in *halacha*; even if Beit Shammai is correct, if the majority holds by the opinion of Beit Hillel,<sup>1</sup> then his is the authoritative ruling. *People* make *halacha*, not God. It is *our* Torah. “There is fiction,” said

---

<sup>1</sup> Shammai and Hillel were Torah scholars and their teachings led to distinct schools of thought in the last century B.C.E. and the early first century C.E.

American singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman, “in the space between the lines on your page of memories” (Chapman). That story, in between the lines of the laws we live by, is a divine spark, an opportunity to create, *b'tzelem elokim*, in the image of God – and it is ours alone to write.

In chapter four of this dissertation, I speak about a concept called “*dreidlich*.” *Dreidlich* shares the same root as *dreidel*, a spinning top. To “do *dreidlich*” means to spin round and round the law without actually transgressing it. In this study I try to demonstrate how doing *dreidlich* makes orthodox observance personal and meaningful – how the bending (but not breaking) of a rule can create a world of opportunity. I identify how ritual misfires – instances where the journey between prescription and enactment, between societal expectation and self-expression, is not cut and dry – are important sites of performance, creativity, and identity. *Dreidlich* is a way for orthodox people to re-imagine their orthodoxy, to make it personal and idiosyncratic, and to remain within a system while questioning its construct of a destination.

Of course, many choose to leave the world of orthodoxy and *halacha*, like Muñoz’s Bad Subject. I am closely connected to many who feel this way and for good reasons. They have been oppressed, ostracised, bullied, and in some cases, abused and traumatized. These people have every reason to reject the system and never look back. As someone coming from my own background and vantage point, however, I am saying something different: that yes, orthodox Judaism is patriarchal, hegemonic, and imperfect, and it is also deeply joyous, intelligent, and meaningful. I believe that orthodox Judaism is a dogmatic religion situated in a tradition that is historically and philosophically reflexive, and that many of its practitioners are performing orthodoxy in powerful and creative ways that I feel a need to recognize.

## Methodology

This dissertation follows the body as a site of the in-between, the interaction between written and

oral<sup>2</sup> law. I deconstruct how the two work together and in conflict in one corner of the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto, Canada, of which I am a part. The geographic coordinates of this community begin at the intersection of Bathurst Street and Eglinton Avenue West, continue northbound until Sheppard Avenue, and span westbound to Dufferin Street. This area of Toronto has a rich Jewish history. Etan Diamond's full length study of the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto entitled *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst* traces the development of Bathurst Street, a significant current and historical site of Jewish and orthodox life. He examines synagogues, schools,<sup>3</sup> kosher grocery stores, bakeries and gift shops as places that "have stamped a Jewish character onto north Bathurst Street, creating... a 'sacred space' that helps to enhance the Orthodox community's cohesiveness and sense of identity" (Gladstone). Ben Kayfetz's essay on Jewish Toronto predates Diamond's by almost forty years, also examining the historical development of the Toronto Jewish community. Kayfetz focusses on several synagogues around Bathurst Street including Holy Blossom Temple, the oldest synagogue in Toronto, which started as an orthodox congregation in the 1850s (6). By the early 1900s, Kayfetz remarks, almost all the Eastern-European strands of Judaism existed in Toronto, including Galicia, Russian Poland, White Russia Lithuania, and Roumania (8). Varying ideological groups were represented as well, including "Labour Zionists of the Syrkin brand and of the Borochovist stripe; Socialists, Anarchists... and Social Territorialists" (8).

One hundred years later, the orthodox Jewish communities in Toronto are still diverse,

---

<sup>2</sup> I want to note that in rabbinic Judaism the Torah is a written text while subsequent rabbinic sources are considered "oral law" (i.e. the Mishnah), even though they ended up being codified and written down. It is important to distinguish between this oral *law* (i.e. the Mishnah), which is written, and oral *traditions*, like family customs and cultural codes, which are passed down generationally through the repertoire.

<sup>3</sup> Seth Jason Goldsweig conducted a study in 2020 that analyzed contemporary Jewish Day School leaders' perceptions of non-orthodox Jewish day school financial sustainability in Toronto. The conclusions of this paper indicate "a need to develop new ideas, to increase collaboration between the schools, and to focus efforts on raising the perceived value of Jewish day school education" (Goldsweig).

and, as is the case with every population, their culture(s) cannot be characterized in black and white terms. There is certainly religious, ethnic, cultural, economic and political diversity and disparity amongst its inhabitants. But I have observed themes in this community as both a member and a researcher, to which I speak in the chapters that follow.

Methodologically, this dissertation is first and foremost an auto-ethnographic study. I present a world that I see and live. I have chosen to limit my research to the city of Toronto because it is my hometown and is where I feel methodologically equipped. The phenomena that I perceive have been revealed to me in a variety of contexts, including but not limited to synagogue, the *mikveh*, Shabbat, holiday meals at others' homes, and my childhood home. Some of the individuals within the dominant culture that reside within the quadrant previously stated possess monetary and material affluence. Some have politically and socially conservative worldviews. And some are religiously narrowminded ("orthodox Jews wear *these* clothes and go to *these* schools, and anything else is considered fringe orthodoxy"). Some possess all of these traits, and some none. I will say that, generally speaking, in comparison to other cities with large orthodox populations such as New York and Jerusalem, the Toronto orthodox community seems to be relatively conservative across the board. In an article entitled "Will the Jewish Community Increasingly Reflect an Orthodox Agenda," published by the Canadian Jewish News in 2017, Bernie Farber, former employee of the now defunct Canadian Jewish Congress, is quoted regarding the orthodox communities' participation in the Toronto Pride Parade. He reflects on those rabbinic leaders who stood "in opposition to this [parade] as a *chillul HaShem* (disgracing God's name), to make common cause with the gay and lesbian community" (Lungen). Farber goes on to say that this proves to him "a significant difference, placing the ultra-Orthodox on the outside. By their own definition, they can't be a part of a modern country when it seems to

violate Torah law” (Lungen). The resistance to modernity and secularism by the extremely orthodox, which Farber describes in his reflections on the Toronto Pride Parade, aligns with what I have observed firsthand in my orthodox community in Toronto. And yet, my observation has been that many individuals situated within these dominant groups are, nevertheless, enacting progressive subversions of rituals and laws that produce incredibly rich and meaningful performance practices, identities and communities.

I would like to point out a few things regarding transliteration within this dissertation. Generally, when transliterating Hebrew and Yiddish terms, I follow standard scholarly conventions; in some cases, however, I have elected to transliterate particular words according to the spelling that appears in published writing within orthodox Jewish communities. For example, regarding my use of the word *halacha*, I have chosen to use this spelling rather than that of majority of scholarly works (*halakha*). The following are a list of words used in this dissertation whose spelling deviates from the scholarly convention and reflects that of the community rhetoric instead: *bechor*, *chametz*, *Charedi*, *Chassidic*, *chillul*, *chodesh*, *halacha*, *lehakot*, *machmir*, *mitzvah*, *moch*, *rebbetzin*, *shatnez*, *shehechyanu*, *shidduch*, *Taharat HaMishpacha*, *tichel*, *tzelem*, *tzivah*, *tzniut*, *yichud*, and *yoetzet*.

I would be remiss if I did not speak about the societal constraints that I have personally experienced through the process of writing this dissertation. Methodological challenges I faced coincided with personal ones I encountered as a member of a religiously conservative culture. I felt (and still feel, to some degree) a need to represent my community favourably and not ‘air our dirty laundry.’ I also feel a very deeply ingrained pressure to fit in, which is largely due to the fact that I lived on the outskirts of orthodoxy as a child and adolescent. I was raised by parents who, I now realize, were in the unique position of practicing orthodox law but not associating

with other orthodox people. I'm not even sure if they would have identified as orthodox back then. We observed Shabbat and *kashrut* in accordance with orthodox standards; however, we were not integrated as part of an orthodox community. My family was affiliated with Aish HaTorah, an outreach organization that caters to secular and newly orthodox individuals, which meant that my siblings and I did not know very many self-identified orthodox people. The only *shomer* Shabbat (Shabbat observing) kids I knew growing up were our down-the-street neighbours, a family of five with three boys with whom we played on Shabbat. It was only when my thirteen-year-old sister made the unexpected choice to attend an all-girls orthodox high school that my family forged ties with an institutionalized orthodoxy and I became conscious of my otherness in a world I was only beginning to understand.

I spend a lot of time in the pages that follow trying to make sense of this world. In retrospect, I realize that during my childhood years I practiced orthodoxy without identifying as such, and that practice and identity are not necessarily connected. It is only upon reflection (mostly during the writing of this dissertation) that I have become conscious that I was at a social disadvantage as a teenager trying to penetrate the orthodox matrix, and as a twenty-something, trying to break into the orthodox dating world, which led to my struggle and 'failure' to conform. I have also come to appreciate how central societal approval was to my coming of age story and how inextricably tied it is to my orthodox identity.

I have studied at orthodox seminaries for women in Jerusalem at various junctures in my life; this was integral to my Jewish education and spiritual development in my teenage years and early twenties. I lived with a girlfriend of mine in an apartment in a neighbourhood called Musrara, located just outside the Old City of Jerusalem. We often went shopping in a neighbouring area called Geula, located next to Mea She'arim. Our favourite clothing shop was

called “Classic Lady” spelled phonetically in Hebrew letters. My friend and I had a running joke that between us we bought out the whole store. The shop was filled with collar high sweaters, thick black tights, mid-length skirts (“midi” was not a thing yet – instead we referred to it endearingly as “ka-ka length, because it was so unflattering”) and plastic banana clips (again, this was before hair accessories were in style) for pulling back women’s hair in the most modest manner. Despite the obvious fact that this shop was not high fashion, we shopped zealously and often. We desperately wanted to play the role of the ‘seminary girl.’ The highest praise came in the form of passing as an ‘F.F.B’ – *Frum* (orthodox) From Birth. Even though I technically was (and am) an F.F.B., since I was raised observing the laws of Shabbat and *kashrut* to a tee, I didn’t feel like one and I certainly didn’t pass as one. I didn’t have the right clothes or hairstyle, I didn’t speak the right lingo, and I certainly never lived a *frum* life of interacting with other orthodox Jews. In fact, when it came to my social status, my knowledge and observance of orthodoxy almost didn’t matter since it wasn’t externally observable. I remember the pleasure I felt after a shopping spree at Classic Lady; I was wearing the right clothes and I finally looked the part (or did I?). My friend and I were conscious of the contrivance of our newly acquired identities, and on some level we knew we were playing pretend, but the pleasure was real and the desire to be more religious was genuine. These were parts that we were choosing to play and we loved how they made us feel, down to the last banana clip.

And yet, despite my desire for approval, I could not wholly follow the herd. While in Israel, I applied to university programs in Canada and the U.S. in fine arts, liberal arts, and humanities. I enrolled in and continued to pursue courses that questioned hegemonic power structures. I auditioned for an exclusive devised theatre program at York University, which included acting training and playwriting, which I subsequently attended. Paradoxically, I

discovered my passion for critical theory and performance studies, subjects that categorically reject social hierarchies, ideologies, and the status quo, while simultaneously evolving spiritually in my Jewish identity, becoming more participatory in the patriarchal prescriptions of religiosity, like modest dress and other gendered rituals that perpetuate orthodox norms and customs. And I was always at odds. It was this tension that produced an impulse inside me to write about orthodoxy, and my subsequent difficulty in doing so.

I have struggled with self-censorship throughout the entirety of my dissertation-writing process, which has fuelled every research and methodological decision I have made. This project is essentially charged with religious anxiety, which has in turn influenced my questions, selections, observations, and conclusions. To a certain extent, this project is tainted – but perhaps it's tainted in the best of ways. Perhaps its taintedness mirrors the very principles of an orthodoxy I attempt to represent in these pages: dogmatism, conformity, blind faith, and at the same time, in the very same breath, a genuine attempt on my part to transcend these things. Perhaps the “impurity” (a term I challenge quite a bit in this dissertation) of this study is true to its spirit: to fail to be objective, to fumble through in conscious clumsiness, and to be perfectly misaligned.

The ethnographic material for this dissertation is the result of ten years of fieldwork – including observations and anecdotes I have collected as a member of the orthodox Jewish community. Interviews took place between September 2008 and July 2016. Stories and commentaries on Torah, Talmud and other canonical texts that are widely known and repeated in Jewish life are also invoked as ethnographic material. I use Corrine Glesne's methodological procedure for qualitative research as follows: (a) state the purpose, (b) pose a problem/state a question, (c) define a research population, (d) develop a time frame, (e) collect and analyse data,

and (f) present the outcome (Madison 19). I address stages (a) to (d) below.

- (a) The purpose of this ethnography is to listen to the stories of orthodox Jewish individuals in Toronto, specifically in response to research questions including, How do orthodox Jewish individuals negotiate the messiness of oral and written traditions of the law in daily life? How are these competing liturgies (the letter of the law and the spirit of the law) played out in the quotidian? What does it look like when Jewish rituals in action complicate/exceed/trouble the very laws they are performing and the picture does not perfectly match up?
- (b) Some of the questions I have posed when interviewing include, Can you tell me what it's like for you to perform this *mitzvah* (commandment)? Can you describe what it looks like? How it feels? Do you ever feel complexity or tension when you perform this Jewish law? Can you tell me about your religious background? Were you raised performing this *mitzvah*? What were the values of your household growing up? Is there ever a discrepancy between what you do and what have been taught to do? What does this ritual mean to you? Is there a physical component? A spiritual component? Does it ever make you feel uncomfortable?
- (c) My selection of interviewees was based on a number of factors. The first is my own positionality in the community I was critiquing. I selected individuals with whom I felt comfortable disclosing the nature of this project. Not only did ethics require that I reveal my research objectives to interviewees, the quality and depth of the study depended on it. At various stages of my research project, I felt insecure about my position in the orthodox world and felt a need to select individuals who would not judge my professional pursuits. Over the years, I have

grown into my unique position in the orthodox community, as an in/outsider, and am more secure in my identity as a kind of religious misfit. At the time when I was selecting interviewees, however, I was at the beginning of my learning process, and my selections were made accordingly. Another objective for my research population was to select individuals who would feel comfortable speaking honestly and expressively about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It was essential that all participants in this study either identified as orthodox or observed orthodox law for an extended period of time in their lives. I interviewed women and men who currently live in Toronto and were between the ages 20 and 39. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms and any potentially identifying factors have been altered to preserve confidentiality.<sup>4</sup> What resulted from this complex cocktail of methodological interviewing factors were the testimonies of extraordinary individuals who shared key characteristics: they each took their religious observance into their own hands and created their own personal spin on the law, they each had a methodical way of practicing and owning their rituals, and regardless of whether they currently subscribed to orthodoxy, they were each conscious and deliberate about the execution and performance of ritual, they leaned into the criticality of religion as opposed to fearing it, and they were all certain that they weren't doing it exactly right.

Theoretically, I suggest a new approach to studying Jewish performance that focuses primarily on the (de)construction of orthodox etiquette texts and the outcomes via performance. Rather than quarantining performance entirely – or at least, the performance of rabbinic law –

---

<sup>4</sup> The only exceptions to this are from individuals who have provided explicit permission to reveal particular details of their lives.

my methodological approach is quite the opposite. The aim of this project is to pay attention to performance, positing that it is in the *midst* of complicated (often contradictory) rules, traditions, and cultural codes that meaning is established and agential capacity is broadened. This study returns to the internal (paradoxically, as so much of it is based on written text), arguing that the very unfolding of etiquette texts and performance manuals (passed down through written texts and bodily surrogation), together with the *impossibility* of their being exactly followed, can in fact recuperate the intentionality of performance in contemporary orthodox culture. Efforts to simplify the law objectify the bodies that enact it and fundamentally undermine the law's productive complicatedness. I believe that these efforts treat performance – or hyper-performance, as the case may be – as a problem to be solved; I argue, to the contrary, that hyper-performance is a special kind of performativity to be viewed, not as the enemy, but rather as the central site of community and discourse, described earlier as “where women and men articulate agency, and where the law becomes personal” (see p. 2 of this dissertation).

Interestingly, the instruction manuals often contradict one another. The variation in interpretations of Jewish law, even within orthodox legislation, is vast and diverse. This requires the performer to take a stand. If “God is in the details,” so, too, is Jewish performance; it is precisely this negotiation – choosing and discarding, identifying and disidentifying, debating and dissecting – within the framework of *halachic* interpretation that, ideally, protects against a herd mentality and ensures jurisprudential good faith.

Broadly speaking, this study makes an argument about the way Jewish laws and traditions are set up – that the performance and the law are not intended to match. I explore four case studies to explicate this point: the first discusses the laws and traditions of *mikveh*, a ritual bath for women following the menstrual cycle; the second examines the laws and traditions of

and leading up to Passover, specifically the purging of *chametz* (leavened bread); the third investigates the genealogy of specific vestimentary laws, particularly those pertaining to male dress, in conjunction/contrast with how they are currently practised, and the fourth critiques the unique cultural codes of orthodox dating rituals for women. In each case, the ritual is anchored by a performance act, but interestingly (and perhaps, more importantly), there is a messy, elaborate, confusing choreography that swirls around these performative acts – a complicated dance that contextualizes them. This methodology mirrors the messiness of Jewish cultural enactment, which becomes meaningful only in its untidiness, its fumbling, its imperfection. The clumsiness of this choreography enables meaningful formations of publics and counter-publics (a project more concerned with the creation of structures than the dismantling of them). By examining this choreography, I attempt to actively engage with failure as a potential site of agency; oftentimes, this is a movement that includes not only human bodies but also objects and spaces.

Through historical, theoretical, and ethnographic analyses, I hope to tease out a conscious engagement with and pleasure in the confusion of these performance practices. I believe that such routines are productive sites for highlighting the intentional contents of “supposed to be” and “being” in between embodiment practice and etiquette texts.

## Context

Both my ethnographic fieldwork and my personal experience suggest a tendency in the Jewish community in Toronto (my home city and the site of my research) to emphasize the external because it is easily measurable. Yet Jewish educators, rabbis, *rebbetzins* (wives of rabbis, sometimes also spiritual leaders), and scholars have noticed a problem of style over substance and are speaking and writing about it. Specifically, the concern is that institutions are privileging

the external over the internal, the performance of the law without necessarily the intent or the meaning behind it.

In the electronic journal *Klal Perspectives*, Rabbi Yitzchok Feigenbaum, principal of Tiferes Bais Yaakov (an orthodox Jewish high school in Toronto) writes, “Where is the next Torah frontier to conquer? The easiest way to get that feeling of growth is to focus on the external – anything you can do I can do stricter ... because internal growth is hard to measure” (Feigenbaum). Feigenbaum is speaking to a particular demographic in orthodox culture – the *Charedi*<sup>5</sup> (ultra-orthodox) community – and to young women, in particular, whom he calls the “Bais Yaakov Girl.”<sup>6</sup> He states,

“So your parents put you into the right Bais Yaakov, you go to the right camp and seminary and build your resume. Then your father buys you some cliché to marry, you have a daughter that you push into the right school, camp and seminary and you build her résumé so she can marry a cliché. Then we all die.” This overview of Yiddishkeit [Judaism] did not come from visibly “at risk” teens. The above summation of life’s goals comes from your establishment, “good family, good girl” Bais Yaakov girl. And there are hundreds like her. (Feigenbaum)

---

<sup>5</sup> The label *Charedi* is a catchall term that has multiple connotations and covers a wide variety of different highly orthodox groups. What unites all of them is an absolute reverence for the Torah (the written and oral law) and a rejection of secularism to some degree. Culturally, ‘*Charedi*’ means something different depending on the geographic location; ‘*Charedi*’ in Jerusalem, for example, refers to the strictest level of insularism, whereas ‘*Charedi*’ in North America has a meaning that is more flexible and fluid. In Toronto, the meaning of *Charedi* is a reflection of the cultural nuances of this particular Jewish community. A *Charedi* synagogue, like Agudath Israel (i.e. “Agudah North”), for example, will contain a very large range of orthodox approaches/observances, whereby the farthest to the “right” (strict) will follow the most extreme rules and cultural codes (for example, men learn Torah full time rather than have secular professions) and those further to the left attend university, have Internet in their homes, and may even be on social media. The individuals that I cite in this dissertation who identify as *Charedi* are all on the latter side of the spectrum, since their very consent to participate in this study reflects a kind of liberalism that might not exist on the far right.

<sup>6</sup> Bais Yaakov is a strand of orthodox, full-time, Jewish elementary and secondary schools for Jewish girls from religious families, established by Sara Shenirer in 1917 and now found throughout the world.

What Feigenbaum is referring to in the “above summation” is the concern that orthodoxy is so performance-obsessed that it is running on auto-pilot. Women, in particular, he suggests, are born into a life with a predetermined script (including the right camp and seminary and a marriage deemed socially acceptable by the Bais Yaakov community), and they are not given a structure for questioning their circumstances and pursuing their individual goals. While the issue of blind faith is certainly not unique to Jewish communities, what is unique is a culture of women so busy dissecting the minutiae of behavioural law that they have neglected to summon the soul.

He goes on,

It was in a very insular and protected *frum* [orthodox] community where I was asked by the senior class, “Doesn’t everyone do *Yiddishkeit* [Judaism] just because everyone else does? No one really knows if it is true – right?” ... Underneath the (double-starched, designer) white shirts and buttoned up uniforms, we have a generation with too many teens who are disconnected, disenchanted and who firmly believe (as one teen put it) that “the emperor has no clothes.” (Feigenbaum)

In this formulation, Feigenbaum addresses a fundamental problem in the pedagogy of the orthodox community in Toronto: the focus is on the double-starched, designer shirt and not on person who dons it. It is a cliché, of course, not to judge a book by its cover, but what is unique here is that we have an orthodox rabbi calling out his own community for being so focused on the external that its members question the very role of consciousness in orthodox Judaism. Given that the religion’s first principle is “I am your God,” a commandment derived precisely from within, the lack of support that students are receiving to practise Judaism mindfully is surprising.

One of the reasons this problem is steadily increasing among women in the community is

what he calls “the elephant in the room”: *shidduchim* (orthodox dating practices involving the particular courtship rituals elaborated upon in chapter five). He asserts that parents are mistakenly directing their children to do what is best for their *shidduch* résumé (a profile circulated among matchmakers for the purpose of matching for marriage) rather than what is best for their spiritual growth. In the Netflix series *Unorthodox*, Esty, a nineteen-year-old orthodox woman trapped in an arranged marriage, flees her home in Chassidic Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and finds sanctuary in Berlin, where her estranged mother lives. In a flashback to a previous life, the viewer is given a glimpse into the pressures of Chassidic *shidduch* dating, in a scene portraying Esty’s first encounter with her prospective mother-in-law. Esty is at the supermarket with her aunt when she is abruptly informed of a pre-arranged rendezvous, of which she had no prior knowledge.

ESTY: What are we doing here?

AUNT: Miriam Shapiro wants to see you.

(Esty looks around.)

ESTY: How will I know which one she is?

AUNT: You won’t. Now walk as if you’re looking for something. With a smile. (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 17:27-17:50, “Part 1”)

The pressures on orthodox single women to look perfect all the time (because you never know who you might see at the supermarket), and to always be ‘on’ are through the roof. Orthodox women are conditioned to operate under the assumption that they are being observed by others at all times for *shidduch* purposes. This is accurately depicted when Esty is instructed to ‘act natural’ – but “with a smile” – in the frozen foods section. The explicit and implicit directives for women to be single-mindedly focussed on *shidduchim* creates a culture of

obsession and superficiality in dating.

Feigenbaum describes a real-life incident in which a young woman said to him, “I always thought I would marry someone who liked me. It appears that I am supposed to marry someone who likes my school.” He writes that another woman exclaimed, “I wish I would have been alive during the Holocaust – I could have been a hero and someone would have written a book about me. Now I am just another good girl who does *chesed* (Jewish community service)” (Feigenbaum). The extent to which the external is overshadowing the internal, Feigenbaum suggests, is staggering and ought to be viewed as a cue to refocus the efforts of parents and educators. Young women are starving for outlets to develop spiritually and personally; their internal self-expression is sublimated so quickly into aesthetic concerns that they are literally constructing holocaust fantasies to quench their thirst.

The anxieties expressed by Feigenbaum are echoed by Rabbi Moshe Weinberger in the same publication. In his article, “Just One Thing is Missing: The Soul,” he asserts,

Our institutions are bursting at the seams. We have a formidable array of daily and weekly publications filled with our own current events and advertisements for the latest, non-*gebrokts*<sup>7</sup> Pesach [Passover] getaways. Many neighborhoods take pride in their “minyan<sup>8</sup> factories” where a Maariv [evening prayer service] can be caught until the wee hours of the night. We have morning kollels [gatherings devoted to advanced Torah study] and evening kollels and *gemachs* [Jewish free loan funds] for everything under the sun. Just one thing is missing: the Soul. (Weinberger)

The reason I include this passage is to illustrate how highly specialized orthodox Jewish

---

<sup>7</sup> This is a minority strand of Passover stringency that prohibits the mixing of *matzah* and water.

<sup>8</sup> This is a quorum of ten Jewish adults – men, specifically, in orthodox communities – required for prayer and to fulfil other religious commandments.

communities have become from an institutional perspective, with the focus, once again, on performing the law “exactly right,” while there seems to be a fundamental problem with spirituality, or the lack thereof. Weinberger identifies the ever-eclipsing external as a branding issue; he calls it the “billboard brand of *frumkeit* [orthodoxy]” (Weinberger).

It is obvious to anyone who is not fooled by the billboard brand of *frumkeit* that it is as shallow and empty as the so-called “Jewish” music blasting at our *simchos* [Jewish events and celebrations] ... The “defectors” who simply couldn’t go on hiding and faking have shed the external uniforms of Yiddishkeit to become the object of our latest outreach efforts. These individuals comprise but a fraction of those who are simply unable, or who are afraid, to disengage, who listlessly drag their feet through the motions of *avodas Hashem* (service of G-d), while waiting desperately for the next “*bain hazmanim*” (intercession), “break in *davening* (prayer),” or any other distraction from the monotony of the charade. (Weinberger)

The “defectors” to whom Weinberger is referring are those individuals who were raised orthodox and eventually choose not to be. Unable to drag their feet through what is required, their response to the “monotonous charade” of Jewish law, to performance without intention, has been either to abandon Judaism or to find an alternative with less performance anxiety.

In this study, I argue for a paradigm shift in how the issue is framed: the problem is not performance anxiety entirely; it’s the way this anxiety is being registered and perceived. Feigenbaum and Weinberger ask the question, what end does performance serve in Torah society? I suggest that we reframe performance anxiety as an end in and of itself; it is in and around and through the need to perfect the external that the internal may be expressed and shared. Already built into contemporary Jewish culture is a complex rhetoric, a language rich in

nuance and texture and gestural dialects, which can be used *for* rather than against a mindfulness-building project. Embracing paradox, this study attempts to reframe performance obsession as of service to and not in violation of a soul.

Joseph Roach offers a theory of surrogation that I adopt as a framework for the study. He believes that communities use stand-ins to substitute for the loss of an “original.” In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach defines an “effigy” (noun) as a “sculpted or pictured likeness” (36). When “effigy” is used as a verb, it means “to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past” (36). Roach contends that effigies fill, by means of surrogation, a vacancy that exists by virtue of the absence of an original. He argues that performances effigize as they consist of “a set of actions that hold open a place in memory” (36). Because collective memory is selective and imaginative, the effigy necessarily fails to perfectly fill the void. “The fit cannot be exact,” he states (2). The very process of auditioning stand-ins, what he calls “the doomed search for originals”(3), produces a vortex of misfits – of trials and errors, deficits, and surpluses – which defines performance and culture. Performance, he argues, stands in for an “elusive identity” that it is not but that must strive to embody and also replace (3).

As an orthodox person living in Toronto and practising rabbinic law, the elusive identity I seek to “embody and also replace” is a concept of the Jewish woman that does not exist and never existed – a misshapen collage of collective memories blending biblical figures and Talmudic legislation and other culturally produced mythical creatures. Because “collective memory works selectively and often perversely,” as Roach suggests, the ideal Jewish performer for which I am an understudy is a fragment of the cultural imagination; my audition for this position is necessarily imperfect. My failure to succeed in this candidacy is precisely the point.

Rama Burshtein’s film *Fill the Void* offers an example that allows us to consider the

effigy quite literally. Set in a *Chareidi* (a highly religious sect of Judaism) community in Tel Aviv, this film follows the journey of a young woman named Shira (coincidentally, a name I share) as she experiences the passing of her sister, who dies in childbirth. Her newborn nephew, now motherless, and her brother-in-law, now widowed and at least ten years her senior, are at a loss. She is confronted with the possibility of marrying her brother-in-law in an attempt to fill the void. Burshtein's film negotiates the terms of a messy (mis)alignment process, by which Shira would potentially stand-in for her sister. The arrangement is imprecise, as Shira is not and can never be her sister, but her almost-ness renders her an (im)perfect candidate to occupy the vacancy. Roach would describe this process this way: "Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure, I hypothesize, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates" (2). Indeed, the arrangement sets Shira up to fail, as "surrogation rarely if ever succeeds" (Roach 2); however, her failure as an effigy may be precisely her success as a Jewish wife and mother.

In the film, it takes time for the family to come to terms with this arrangement. Shira is the last to get on board. Her mother first approaches Yochay, Shira's widowed brother-in-law, with the idea, and he resists.

MOTHER: Why not Shira?

YOCHAY: Is that your idea? Where'd you come up with that?

MOTHER: It feels right.

YOCHAY: She's a baby.

MOTHER: She's 18. Who could be better for Mordechai?

YOCHAY: That's not enough.

MOTHER: Is it better to ... marry a stranger? (26:10)

Yochay resists the match. But Shira's mother works hard to convince him as well as her

husband, Shira's father. "I wouldn't consider this if I didn't think it was a good idea," she says, to which her husband responds, "It won't bring Esther [Shira's deceased sister] back" (34:45).

In a later scene, women gather to discuss who would make a more suitable match for Yochay, Shira or Freida, Shira's sister's good friend (59:34). Symbolically, they grapple with the God-size hole of Esther's death and the pain they feel in attempting to fill it. "Surrogation rarely if ever succeeds..." Roach asserts. "The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceed them, creating a surplus" (2).

If performance is a substitute for an ideal – in the case of this study, if the performance of Jewish law stands in for an abstract Jewish spirit that possibly does not exist beyond being a categorical imperative – what happens when the stand-in exceeds the original? Can the performance of the law, in all its chaos and disfigurement, create a surplus that succeeds by virtue of its imprecision? Can the inability to enact the law be the very impetus behind it? I believe that the failure of Jewish bodies to meet Jewish standards is a significant site of misfire; inside that misfire lives pain and heartbreak, but also sincerity, intent, and deliberation – in a word, consciousness.

#### Project Description and Research Objectives

This project aims to explore how gendered Jewish societies and identities are constructed and play out within orthodox culture and what this negotiation looks like through a performance lens. I posit that performance lives between the Jewish text (the letter of the law) and Jewish tradition (the spirit of the law). The nuances that exist between individual iterations of Jewish performance – that is, personal interpretations of the law – render every performance different and unique. It is impossible to perform the law "exactly"; between the laws of gender (what Jewish men and women are rabbinically instructed to *do*) and the idea of the gender (who Jewish

men and women are culturally instructed to *be*) is subjectivity, individuality – performance.

This study looks at the performance of gender and sexuality in Jewish culture in three fundamental registers (each of which grounds a chapter, as will be explained later) – spatial, tactile, and vestimentary. Chapter two on “Jewish space,” looks at how *mikveh* practice, a ritual bath performed by Jewish women after menstruation, and *mikveh* space form communities and sex discourses among orthodox Jewish women. Drawing on ethnographic research in Toronto, this chapter highlights the concealed yet communal nature of *mikveh* experience by drawing out a third space between public and private.

Chapter three addresses the “textual/tactile” register, examining objects on display in the Passover *Seder* and the ways in which the written words (narrative text) serve to inform and also counteract the function of the tactile in this performance practice. In a passage mentioned earlier, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett posits that material objects are not inherently meaningful but become so only when they are contextualized by the worldviews of their carriers. She writes, “They are what they are by virtue of the disciplines that “know” them (2). Reorienting this statement slightly, one could say that an object produces its meaning upon being “carried away” – transported into a particular context. As in Butler’s theory that the physical body learns sex and gender through a process of materialization, objects develop significance through a rehearsal process, and through this process of becoming – that is, ongoing disciplinary engagement and interaction – they turn into artifacts. Indeed, objects “are exhibits of those who make them” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2). My chapter on “textual/tactile” attempts to understand the Jewishness of *Seder* items and liturgy by “carrying them away,” so to speak, and contextualizing them in an orthodox culture Jewish culture. *Matzah* (unleavened bread), specifically, is a ritual object I remove from the *Seder* and situate within the context of its counterpart, *chametz*. I draw from

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's understanding of the artifact as well – specifically, her method of reading objects – to contextualize *Seder* objects within a particular sociopolitical context and illuminate their function as both (hetero)normative and subversive agents.

In chapter four, the third analysis, which focusses on “vestimentary” practices, examines concepts of masculinity presented in/through modes of dress in the orthodox community in Toronto. Clothing, facial hair, and other particular modes of dress produce masculinity in orthodox culture. This concept of masculinity is based, not entirely but in part, on difference – appearing odd, distinct from the dominant culture. Jewish dress queers the subject through a process of disidentification. Because some of the performance scripts that dictate the laws of dress are not implied but actually written, it is impossible to “get it exactly right”; two competing scripts work in tandem/opposition. The first is a text-based script, the letter of the law. This includes the laws pertaining to facial hair (sidelocks and beard) and *tzitzit* (a four-cornered garment with fringes that men are required to wear) and other laws pertaining to male dress, which other Jewish males in secular culture do not practice. The second is a performance that I call *dreidlich*, a practice of curving in and around and between the written law. This is a script that is not written but passed down through surrogation and cultural tradition, which produces simultaneously a concept of orthodox manhood highly influenced by anti-Semitic stereotypes and modes of thinking and a biblical concept of manhood that is inherently Jewish (unrelated to Zionism).

Finally, the study returns to the unmarried orthodox women from which it began. In a highly ethnographic section, it addresses the “*Shidduch* Crisis” as perceived by orthodox people in the Toronto Jewish community through interviews primarily with divorced woman. These women speak about the limitations of orthodox performance for unmarried women and of how

they find freedom and pleasure in actions that are, what I call, “in spite of, in between, and through” – to believe, behave, act upon, educate, wear, and respond to. These performatives capture their desire for authenticity and Jewish expression in a society that does not externally validate them.

## Literature

This study draws on gender and performance theory to elaborate a theory of performing Jewishness and sexuality. *In Bodies that Matter*, Butler asks, “If gender is a construction, must there be an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who enacts or performs that construction? How can there be an activity, a constructing, without presupposing an agent who precedes and performs that activity?” (7). She argues that there is no such thing as an “I” that has not been subjected to ideologies of gender: “[T]he I neither precedes nor follows the process of gendering” (8). She posits that the “I” emerges in the midst of complicated gender dynamics – in orthodox Jewish contexts, I will argue, between iterations of gender. The construction of gender identity in orthodox Jewish communities exists inside the ritual activity that materializes gender roles and thus inside a performance of the “I” that is an impossibility. Butler states,

Materialization is never quite complete ... bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up in this process that mark one domain in which the force of regulatory law can be turned up against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that regulatory law. (2)

The body’s inability to comply fully with the norms of orthodox Jewish culture (and the ideal of rabbinic scripture) is precisely the lag that marks the ontology of Jewish performance. The doing of norms is where the nuances emerge. It is in these nuances, nuances that can only be formed in

and around and between gendered Jewish ritual, where subjectivity lives and identity is formed. Following Butler, this study argues that it is the body's inability to comply fully with the law, whether through *mikveh* waters, through the removal of *chametz*, or through vestimentary obligations, and its *performance* from inside that position of frustration, that is precisely the heart of Jewish tradition. This lag between doing and feeling creates space for performance of identity to take place, which renders the *halacha* (Jewish law) personal and individual and marks the ontology of Jewish performance. The complicated dance between enacting the law – in real space with real bodies and real objects – and striving toward an abstract ideal produces a clumsy alignment indeed; the very messiness of this display – the *misalignment* – steeps it in sincerity and intent, thus rendering it a *halachic* (Jewish legal) ideal despite its not being structurally sound. The very fact that the mechanics of this process are *imperfect*, indeed, defines its spiritual efficacy.

The relationship between the textual and the ephemeral – what I am calling, “letter” and “spirit” – is unique in this case, as oral traditions are continually (re)written and passed down alongside the biblical law. These *halachot* (rabbinic laws), written in the form of instruction manuals, are important because they are numerous and often contradict each other. There are, obviously, multiple ways of interpreting Jewish law. If for every ritual in Judaism there is extensive literature on the way the individual must perform that act – and a corresponding set of detailed guidelines – what happens when the literature is contradictory, when opinions differ? For example, men are instructed to wear phylacteries (leather straps) during the weekday morning prayer. What happens when there are twelve contradictory opinions regarding the donning of this item? No matter how a man applies his phylacteries in the morning, he will, in a sense, be right and also wrong, depending on the perspective. Every performance of ritual/law is

thus politically charged because it necessarily reinforces and opposes a particular ideology. In a Butlerian sense, embedded in every iteration of the law is an element of subversion; one cannot perform the law without simultaneously disrupting it.

In the past, scholars have painted a picture of orthodox Jewish women, in particular, as oppressed and repressed, equating performativity and subversion with the act of undoing (upon which I elaborate in chapter two) – the conscious deconstruction of gender via performance. In contrast, the areas of this study that focus on gender explore a second strand of performance theory: the gestural, discursive, ritualized acts that sometimes enforce and other times disrupt the regulated gendered system of orthodox Judaism.

In her book, *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood writes about agency in the context of orthodox Muslim communities. Mahmood posits that agency exists within existing power structures, and that the doing – that is, the mindful enactment – of social norms is what provides the means for its destabilization. She states,

It is important to note that there are several points on which Butler departs from the notions of agency and resistance that I criticized earlier ... Butler locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside of it) and, more importantly, suggests that the reiterative structure of norms serves not only to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its *destabilization*. In other words, there is no possibility of “undoing” social norms that is independent of the “doing” of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability. (8)

For Mahmood, this “productive reiterability” is precisely where agency resides. Her theory sheds light on the meaning behind gendered performance practices in the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto. These women utilize *mikveh* spaces, for example, to process sexuality, articulate

individual agency, establish community, and share experience. *Mikveh* creates a space for women to negotiate gender and sexuality from within the law, attending to a kind of nuanced “doing” of gender (rather than to its undoing).

When dealing with the issue of subversion, it seems just as important to explore manifestations of the act of doing that take place from within the law as it is to explore manifestations of the act of undoing that take place in opposition to it. This study identifies the constructedness of gender in orthodox communities while challenging the picture of orthodox women as oppressed and repressed.

To date, performance scholars have written extensively about Jewish ritual, and my work aims to extend these analyses and situate them within a larger theoretical framework of surrogation. This study pays particular attention to the breadth of literature pertaining to Jewish ritual and how these performance texts function as an effigy that necessarily fails to “perfect” conforming to religious commandments. My work builds upon research conducted by scholars of ritual and anthropologists such as Barbara Myerhoff, who published two ethnographies of Jewish life and culture – *Number Our Days* and *Remembered Lives* – that explore the lives of elderly Jews living in the Aliya Senior Citizens Centre in Venice, California. Myerhoff analyzes various Jewish subjects and rituals, such a graduation *Siyum*, a birthday ceremony for the elderly, and the role of the *Bobbe*, the grandmother and traditional matriarch of a Jewish family, as well as performance practices related to Talmudic learning, dietary and cooking rituals, and death and mourning. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines various Jewish rituals as well, such as the Passover *Seder*, “kitchen Judaism,” the Jewish charity fair, and the Chassidic Purim *Shpiel*. These texts differ from anthropological analyses in that they use performance theory as a lens to view Jewish traditions. To understand the politics behind the graduation *Siyum*, for example, Myerhoff

borrows Victor Turner's theory of social drama (breach of norms, crisis, redress, and realignment of social relations) to deconstruct socio-religious friction.

As well, scholars such as Jonathan Friedman, Warren Hoffman, and Henry Bial have examined Jewishness, performance, and sexuality and provide a theoretical context in this study for thinking about this conjunction. In *Rainbow Jews*, Friedman examines the constitutive role the performing arts has played in the construction of both Jewish and gay identity over the past decades (2). Hoffman's text *The Passing Game* critiques Friedman's study, claiming that his historical analysis of queer Jewish texts (mostly texts that anchor themselves either in gay Jewish characters or milieus with gay storylines, authored in large part by individuals who identify as gay and Jewish or lesbian and Jewish [3]), limits us to the post-Stonewall period when contemporary gay identity emerged. He asks, "How did they address and engage the intersection of Jewish and queer identities?" (3-4), and argues that the queering Friedman suggests in his analysis of pre-Stonewall Jewish playscripts does not, in fact, fit his own description of queer Jewish theatre. He advocates a more expansive category of queer, suggesting that any piece of culture that deals with themes of Jewishness and queer sexuality and places them in conversation with each other constitutes queer Jewish culture, regardless of the religious or sexual orientations of the author/artist (4). In *Acting Jewish*, Bial marries Jewish culture and practice (*halacha*, specifically) in his analysis of queer Jewish performance. He writes, "Jews are often called the 'people of performance.' While any child born of a Jewish mother is a Jew, the process of making oneself Jewish in a religious sense requires action" (3). Hoffman's expansive notion of queer and Bial's understanding of 'orthodoxy as becoming' are particularly useful to chapter four of this dissertation, when I characterize *dreidlich* as an evolving, creative, almost queer performance of identity.

Rebecca Rossen's essays "Hasidic Drag" and "The Jewish Man and His Dancing Schtick" look at particular strands of dance and performance that (re)present Jewish concepts of gender and sexuality. She delineates concepts of the masculine in her analysis of traditional Jewish rituals as well as drag/cross-dressing performance practices. These texts focus primarily on the undoing of Jewish concepts of gender and sexuality via performance, specifically same-sex desire/partnership and cross-dressing/drag. The present study moves away from this strand of performativity, as it focuses on the doings of gender and sexuality in orthodox Jewish communities and on how these acts can also be viewed as empowering and subversive. It aims to identify the problem of understanding subversion in a simple way. In a Butlerian sense, this project begins from the premise that the process of becoming a Jew necessarily lies in performing law, and in so doing, undoing law.

Jillian Gould's dissertation, *Heimish and Home-ish*, is a useful ethnographic model for my project as it examines contemporary Jewish culture in a similar manner. Extending Myheroff's research at the Aliya Centre, Gould's study explores how elderly individuals living in a facility in Toronto "create and recreate tangible and intangible notions of home." She articulates an ontology of home, suggesting that "[h]ome is not the physical structure, but rather the way we imbue spaces with value and meaning"<sup>9</sup>.

Little scholarly research exists in the field of performance studies that addresses explicitly orthodox Jewish practices. There are texts that elaborate on orthodox Jewish rituals and cultural codes, but these texts are not theorized in relationship to performance theory. Sarah Bunin Benor's book, *Becoming Frum*, deconstructs the legal responsibilities and cultural habits

---

<sup>9</sup> My study follows the same performance-based logic as Gould's; specifically, exploring how Jewish spaces take on certain meanings based on the performance practices they contain.

that a formerly secular Jew acquires in the process of mainstreaming into orthodoxy. Such individuals, *Ba'alei Teshuva*, undergo a tacit “conversion” upon committing to an orthodox ideology and lifestyle. Bunin Benor describes (though not in these terms) a Butlerian process of materialization, as she outlines how *Ba'alei Teshuva* learn how to act/be orthodox. She identifies the behavioural adjustments required in this liminal state, including language socialization, vestimentary changes, and newly inhabited rituals. In a Beauvoirian sense, *Ba'alei Teshuva* “are not born, but become” devout, as they learn to perform orthodox(ly). In one of the few texts to explicitly reference performance theory, Natalie Deborah Weiser takes up similar themes in *Becoming an Observant Jewish Woman*.

In this area of scholarship, what we can see are four overlapping conversations around performing Jewishness and sexuality: performance and gender theory (Butler, Taylor, etc.); studies in Jewish ritual and culture (not orthodox) from the perspective of performance (Myerhoff, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett); studies in Jewish ritual and culture (not orthodox) from the perspective of queer performance (Friedman, Hoffman, Bial, Moore, Rossen, etc.); and studies in ritual and culture that are specifically orthodox but *not* from the perspective of performance theory (Bunin Benor, Weiser). While Weiser describes how various orthodox rituals are enacted, she does not utilize performance as a methodology in her study nor does she identify how orthodox societies are impacted, changed, or shaped by these practices. What is missing is scholarship that theorizes gendered orthodox Jewish ritual and culture in the field of performance studies. My project is to read performance theory into an ethnography of the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto, methodologically extending Gould’s approach but putting orthodox Jewish perspectives at the centre.

## Overview

In outlining my study, I return to one of the issues with which I started: the plethora of performance manuals in orthodox culture make quite a mess indeed, and yet the very entanglement of the letter and the spirit of the law that results from that mess creates a space for identity and individuality to form. The present study examines moments that exceed/trouble/complicate the classic framework for Jewish law. It begins with three rituals that effigize in three registers: the *mikveh* (ritual bath) (spatial register), the Pesach *Seder* (Passover display) (tactile/text register) and laws of dress (vestimentary register). In three case studies associated with these rituals, I attempt to illustrate how the impossibility of the law is what actually makes it meaningful; in the final chapter, I depart from this framework, drawing attention to a population of marginalized single and divorced women, while extending themes of conscious enactment and mindful embodiment in an analysis of disidentificatory practices within the *shidduch* system.

In chapter two, “Performing Jewish Sexuality: *Mikveh* Ritual in Orthodox Jewish Publics,” I focus on concepts of space, analyzing the ways in which *mikveh* ritual (“ritual bath for women following the menstrual cycle” [see p. 22 of this dissertation]), and *mikveh* space establish a vocabulary of bodily acts and performance practices that generate communities and sex discourses among orthodox Jewish women. The study challenges the Habermasian idea of the public by laying out a concept based on privacy, silent prayer, and internal regard for other women, as well as spiritual discipline within a tightly knit structure of religious commandments. By conflating public and private, *mikveh* ritual practitioners create a community through delineating the private practices of orthodox Jewish women. This “public of the private” complicates Habermas’s ideal public sphere as one created through rational argumentation and

debate because it privileges silence, contemplation, practice, and the internal spiritual state. Through auto-ethnographic research and first-hand interviews with *mikveh* performers, this chapter highlights the concealed yet communal nature of *mikveh* experience/bonding by drawing out a kind of third space that lives between Habermas's model of the Elizabethan coffeehouse (59) and Foucault's notion of sexual regulation as an incitement to discourse (17).

Chapter three, "Passover Objects: How to Be/Have Them," focuses on bodies and objects. Drawing from thing theory, gender theory, and phenomenology, I explore the relationship between object and performance at Passover *Seder*; specifically, how objects *do* in the Passover *Seder*. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in a passage discussed earlier, posits that material objects become meaningful when their meanings are defined by the worldviews of their carriers. I extended this to suggest that an object develops its meaning upon being carried away. We understand from gender theory how the physical body learns sex and gender through a process of materialization. I apply this theory to objects as well, arguing that physical objects "learn" their significance through a similar rehearsal process. Thus, chapter three attempts to understand how objects at the Passover *Seder* become Jewish by being "carried away," in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's terms, and contextualized in orthodox Jewish culture. I also borrow Butler's concept of materialization to theorize the material objects involved in the *Seder* and the gender roles they inform.

I then analyse the *matzah* object in depth and the object-relation story in which it is situated. Between and through and around *matzah* practice exists a culture of vigilance and scrupulousness among orthodox Jewish women. I argue that *matzah* ritual is a demonstration of this culture, and further, that the absence *chametz* (leavened bread) during Passover ghosts *matzah* and hails women to perform gender at the *Seder*. I believe that performance studies can

help to deconstruct what/how *matzah does* at the *Seder* and to understand its cultural thickness. Performance theory provides a framework to break down the complicated dance between bodies and objects involved in *Seder* ritual. In the past, we have understood performance as bodily enactment: singing songs, wearing clothes, etc. At the *Seder*, though, we see that objects produce meaning more than bodies. This chapter looks at the is-ness of Jewish performance at the *Seder*, contesting a concept of performance that operates purely in bodily terms. I suggest that object and performance, including various doings and non-doings, work together to constitute gender in orthodox communities and examine how the laws pertaining not only to *Seder* ritual but also to the preparatory acts that precipitate the *Seder*, set the piece in motion, cuing ritual choreography and positioning subjects in relation to objects at the *Seder*. *Matzah* ritual, in particular, hails women and, in so doing, genders the *Seder*. Applying Butler's concept of materialization to objects at the *Seder* imbues them with agential capacity and invites us to view *Seder* practice as an exhibit that uses objects on display to (re)present Jewish gender and sexuality in motion.

Chapter four, "Turn it Over, Turn it Over: Masculinity and *Dreidlich* in Orthodox Dress," discusses how biblical imagery and past vestimentary choreographies gave rise to a complicated dynamic between Jewish people, men in particular, and the clothes they wore, which ultimately constructed an imaginary image of the Jew against which he is ever-compared. Using a short story by prolific nineteenth century Jewish author and playwright Sholom Aleichem (pseudonym of Sholom Rabinovitsh) as a parable, I argue that clothing and vestimentary practices are expressions of *dreidlich* for orthodox men: a process of self-identification that is gendered male, Jewish, and pendulates between the real and the imaginary, the tangible and the intangible, the material and the spiritual. It is a paradox that precludes simultaneous societal acceptance and authentic expressions of faith. *Dreidlich* shares the same root as *dreidel*, a spinning top. To "do

*dreidlich*” means to spin round and round the law without actually transgressing it. Quite a lot of turning around occurs for the men presented in this chapter, as they swirl around the many Talmudic laws that govern almost every minute of the day – when to pray, when to eat, when to learn, when to sleep, and all the blessings before and after and in between. Physical dress is just one of many ways that men do *dreidlich*, stretching and bending the law to express themselves while making sure to not do anything ‘illegal.’

Clothing has historically accomplished three tasks: differentiation and self-preservation; assimilation and self-protection; and most importantly, aspiring toward authenticity and belief through ongoing negotiation with/against its multiple discourses. This chapter analyzes how, biblically and historically, stories were mapped onto Jewish bodies and what those stories have accomplished and continue to accomplish culturally. Using Roach’s framework of surrogation, I examine two distinctly Jewish vestimentary objects, *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, and argue that the laws pertaining to these props set up an impossible ideal against which Jewish bodies are staged. I argue that, by donning these items of clothing, Jewish men engage with a law that is paradoxically (and, in fact, impossibly) structured; through a process of failure, Jewish men sustain belief and regroup Jewish spirituality. My discourse analysis poses the following questions: How do the laws of ritual dress memorialize and materialize abstract Jewish histories and concepts? How has the Jewish male functioned historically as an understudy for an imagined original? How is the failure of male bodies to meet Jewish standards precisely the point where identities collide and agency is established?

Chapter five, “The *Shidduch* Crisis: Marriage and Failure in the Orthodox Toronto,” focuses on the experiences of various unmarried and divorced women in the orthodox Jewish community in Toronto and how their identities interact with their single status. As part of this

community, I am aware of how this religious subculture functions on social and political levels. This chapter complicates the notion of failure set up in the previous chapters; these women are marginalized for their singleness, which is a very different subject of discussion from how to perfectly perform a *mitzvah* like *mikveh* ritual or the Passover *Seder*. Despite being marginalized, however, many women have chosen to respond to their suffering by creating platforms for scholarship, spaces for Torah learning, and new identities for themselves that embrace and integrate difference within orthodoxy.

The orthodox Jewish community in Toronto is infamous among orthodox Jews across North America for being narrow-minded and divided, at least relative to New York, Los Angeles, and Jerusalem. In these other places, a woman might cover her hair (an orthodox practice) and also wear pants (a practice disputed in orthodox circles). In contrast, Torontonians who identify as orthodox are, generally speaking, uncomfortable with a more expansive understanding of orthodox and/or more nuanced modes of religious conduct. Jewish individuals are categorized based on levels of observance and placed into boxes with very little wiggle room. For example, during an interview, Gaby (pseudonym), an orthodox Jewish wife and mother of three, described the “audition” process she underwent when being considered for a Bais Yaakov, *Charedi* (highly religious) elementary school to which she hoped to send her children. She described some of the lifestyle changes she and her husband made to (publicly) attest to their strict level of religious observance. These changes included particular modes of dress for Gaby, deemed culturally acceptable (longer skirts, thicker tights, particular hair coverings, etc.) by the school, and also the disabling of various types of media in their home, including television, the Internet, and Facebook. While such measures are certainly not specific to the *Charedi* movement in Toronto, I do wonder if Gaby’s family felt limited due to the small number of orthodox girls

schools in Toronto. This paucity of choice stems from a general anxiety in the community around colour and diversity (see above Feigenbaum; Weinberger). Cities like New York and Jerusalem offer a wider variety and more extensive menu of Jewish schools, as they cater to more diverse populations within the orthodox Jewish community.

As a researcher, I am interested in exploring the paradox of feeling boxed in (how some participants in this study feel: stuck and yet also adapting to fit in) as well as the infinite possibilities contained within that box, and how these tensions are worked through and negotiated within Jewish-Canadian cultural politics. Toronto is situated alongside Montreal (a city equally divided religiously) as well as in the shadow of New York, a city that, in contrast, is known for its open and diverse orthodox population. This chapter suggests that orthodox Jewish Torontonians identify with the very rigidity that they find limiting. It is also, more importantly, the ground from which they can depart, diverge, and deconstruct. It is within these restrictions that many orthodox people find freedom in flexing their creativity, renewing their committing to criticality, expanding and adapting their ritual enactments, and strengthening their spiritual muscles. The conservative ideological framework of many members of the orthodox community in Toronto is a significant point of entry into the research I am conducting; it has certainly been my springboard. Contextually, it poses three questions. First, how do geography and culture work together to produce a rigid yet authoritatively complex law, supported by nuanced and often contradictory etiquette texts and oral traditions? Second, how does this set up a framework for the individual to work with and against such a confusing structure? And, third, how does this complicated performance of orthodoxy produce the very bodies that enact it?

What I have found through the ethnographic research in four distinct (though overlapping) orthodox Jewish contexts – the *mikveh*, the Passover *Seder*, men's dress and

women's dating processes – is that agency can be exercised within restriction, that criticality can coexist within complicitness, and that strength and beauty can be found even within patriarchal settings, if one just has the patience and the willingness to look.

## Chapter Two: Performing Jewish Sexuality: *Mikveh* Spaces in Orthodox Jewish Publics

Natalie Portman addressed tens of thousands of people at the Women's March in Los Angeles in January 2018, speaking of the #metoo movement in reference to her own experiences as an adolescent in Hollywood, a culture she characterizes as sexual terrorism. "I understood very quickly," she states, "even as a thirteen-year-old, that if I were to express myself sexually I would feel unsafe, and that men would feel entitled to discuss and objectify my body, to my great discomfort." She goes on to describe how she quickly learned to adjust her behaviour, emphasizing to the public how bookish and serious she was. Portman concludes her speech by proposing a way to move the Time's Up revolution forward: "Let's declare loud and clear, this is what I want, this is what I need, this is what I desire, this is how you can help me achieve pleasure... let's find a space where we mutually, consensually, look out for each other's pleasure, and allow the vast, limitless range of desire to be expressed. Let's make a revolution of desire."

I watch this speech on YouTube during my first year of marriage, and I hear my phone alarm sound, reminding me to do my *bedikah*, a vaginal checking ritual related to my menstrual cycle, before *chatzot*, mid-day (according to the Jewish calendar). These checks are part of an elaborate, complex set of laws surrounding the *mikveh* practice, which is a kind of a ritual bath. *Mikveh* rituals are performed by women and are regulated by rabbis. They are discursive, ongoing, and pertain to a woman's preparation to perform the *mikveh* immersion. The laws of *niddah*, the umbrella term under which practices like the *bedikah* and *mikveh* are categorized, are considered the most important of women's commandments by far, and arguably the most important of the entire Torah. These rituals involve internal vaginal examinations women do for

seven days after the completion of her period, using cotton cloths called *bedikah* cloths. If the cloth is completely spotless for seven straight days, she may immerse in the *mikveh*; if any cloth has a spot, she begins counting again. *Bedikahs* are performed in private.

Over the last half a century at least, the laws of *niddah* have been widely criticised for being patriarchal and sexist. Many amongst the reform, conservative, egalitarian, reconstructionist, and modern orthodox no longer observe them, or have adapted them significantly from their original rabbinic structure. In mainstream orthodox circles, including the community in mid-town Toronto of which I am a part, the laws are widely practiced in their traditional form.

I perform the *bedikah* as I contemplate Portman's words. It occurs to me how many times I had in the past, during moments of frustration, considered "cheating" – turning a blind eye when I didn't want to see something on the cloth, or conveniently "forgetting" to do *bedikahs* when I just wanted to accelerate the ritual. At the same time, in that same moment, I consider my desire – the desire that saturates the *bedikah* movement and the practices of *niddah* more broadly. Because *bedikahs* precede the *mikveh*, which is the point when women practicing the laws of *niddah* can resume sexual activity (something from which they refrained for a week following menstruation), sexuality permeates the air. Sexual desire is, some would argue, systemically presupposed in the *bedikah* process; the law ebbs and flows in relation to it. I reflect on the simultaneity of these apparently disparate thoughts: the desire and the law, the "cheating" and the empowerment. The enmeshment of these ideas intrigues me. I ponder Portman's words: "The vast, limitless range of desire..." "A space where we mutually, consensually, look out for each other's pleasure." Space. Consent. Pleasure. These are words that mean something to me in the context of my worldview and in my Jewish, orthodox expressions of sexuality. I consent. I

choose. I desire. It's not exactly a *revolution* of desire... but it's a safe, deliberate, pleasure-filled place.

It is ironic, without a doubt, to bring together Portman's sentiments on female empowerment with a male-regulated system for female menstruation (the rabbinic codification and regulation of these laws fits the very definition of patriarchy). However, it is also true that themes of female autonomy, power, pleasure, and desire have something to do with this unique set of rules. In Stephanie Wellen Levine's ethnography of Chassidic girls in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, she reflects upon the fact that "these girls [possess] confidence and spirit within orthodox Judaism's unabashed patriarchal structure" (194). She states,

Considering them within the depths of their theology, I realize that it's not a paradox so much as a multidimensional view of the universe. In the spiritual sphere, women command every bit as much influence as men. They can bring the Messianic era; they can bury sparks of God's infinite light; they can save the universe from extinction. (194)

When I was married and performed *bedikahs*, I felt empowered. These laws were mine; no one else could see them and no one else could control them. They are scripted, to be sure, but they are consensual. And when, in some cases but not all, they are supervised by men, it was because I chose for them to be, and I controlled whether I would follow their instruction.

Unlike synagogue attendance, Torah-reading, *tefillin* (phylacteries)-donning, and other laws traditionally performed by men, this women's commandment is privately-performed<sup>10</sup>, only

---

<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that there is, of course, a very long history of women being marginalized in the private sphere, a subject that Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett historicizes brilliantly in her essay, "The Moral Sublime: Jewish Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century America," discussing how women utilized ritual events like the Purim ball and the Hanukkah pageant to establish space in the public sphere. In the pages that follow, this chapter will explore how *mikveh* rituals extend the legacy of marginalization in some ways and challenge it in others. At this juncture, I will say that while the privacy of *bedikahs* and other orthodox laws for women is certainly a continuation of the historical trajectory previously stated, it also benefits women, specifically, in that their laws have limited surveillance.

to be made public by autonomy and consent. The ritual – the secret – is situated quite literally in a woman’s underwear. Public rituals presuppose communal advisement; this set of laws, conversely, is completely self-directed, which renders it, by extension, necessarily autonomous. At every step (and there are many) a woman needs to ask herself: do I want this? Am I committed to this? And she will choose. Due to the unique methodology of this particular section of Jewish legislature, the various steps of *niddah* ritual create for some women, in effect, a discursive system of autonomy – over their bodies, their desires, and their religion.

A cynic might look at these laws and ascertain that they certainly do a good job of keeping women busy and making them feel important while they are being controlled. But as a human practitioner of these rituals, I say that yes, we are busy with them and yes, we are being controlled. At the same time, we are exercising power. These laws are our way of *leaning into* pleasure and desire, within a culture that, frankly, while patriarchal, never felt as unsafe to me as the secular culture in which I also lived that objectified and sexualized women in precisely the ways that Portman details. These two statements – that we are being controlled and that we have control – can and do coexist in this world, and I am living proof of that fact. In the chapter that follows, I hope to illustrate a fragment of the orthodox Jewish custom that is patriarchal – and in some ways, repressive – and also critical, constructive, and agential. I hope that my personal experiences together with my ethnographic research on the experiences of others will help to illustrate how this complicated, uniquely choreographed and highly misunderstood system of law is in fact a contemporary expression of sexuality, criticality and desire.

### *Niddah*

What is *niddah*? Following the Jewish calendar, on the seventh eve after a woman completes her monthly menstrual cycle, she prepares to go to the *mikveh*. Approximately one hour before

*sunset*, she begins the first part of her preparatory practices. She immerses her body in a hot bath and cleanses herself. She removes any dirt or grime from her body, including her nostrils, eyelids, underarms, and bellybutton. She cleans her earring holes, the spaces between her toes, and the plaque between her teeth. She carefully removes any dirt from underneath her fingernails. She soaks in a bath for approximately thirty minutes, after which she takes a shower to complete the cleansing process – a full hair and body scrub. She emerges from the shower and begins a detangling procedure, drawing a comb through her hair so that no knots remain. She then uses her fingers to comb her pubic hair similarly. She does not apply any products whatsoever to her body, including face moisturizer, body lotion, or hair product.

She dresses and heads to the *mikveh*, where she is greeted by a woman at the front desk. “Shower or bath?” she is asked. Since she has already bathed (though some women prefer to bathe in specially designated rooms at the *mikveh* house, which is also permitted) she requests a room with a shower. She is instructed to leave her shoes outside the door so that it is apparent that the room is occupied and to press the green “ready” button when she has taken her second shower, part two of the preparation process. She enters the room; it is equipped with towels, flip-flops, soap, and shampoo. She removes her clothes. She takes her second shower, this time only rinsing her body since it has already been cleansed in full<sup>11</sup>. When finished, she wraps herself in a towel, presses the “ready” button, and waits for her turn to use the *mikveh*.

A female attendant knocks on her door. Upon entering, she asks if the woman has prepared for the *mikveh*. “Did you check your nails, your hair, your bellybutton, your earring-holes?” The reason, she is told, is that no substance – including dirt, grime, or tangles – is permitted to come between the woman’s body and the *mikveh* water. These things are considered

---

<sup>11</sup> Some women choose to wash their hair and bodies at the *mikveh*, which is why the room is equipped with washing items.

barriers, which would render the dunk ‘not-kosher.’ If the answer is yes to all three, the attendant leads her to an adjoining room, the *mikveh* water. The attendant averts her eyes so that the woman can remove her towel modestly. The woman steps into the *mikveh*, a small pool of water. Once neck-deep, she cues the attendant and the immersions begin. She dunks her entire body so that even the hairs on the very top of her head are beneath the water. She rises to the top after full-immersion, and, if no errors were made, the attendant declares, “Kosher!” The woman then recites a blessing (some women choose to cover their hair with a cloth while reciting the blessing, though most agree that this is not required) and proceeds to dunk a second time. The attendant declares a second “Kosher!” when she rises and then the woman dunks a third and final time, with the third and final “Kosher!” to conclude the event.

She returns to her preparation room, dresses, and makes her way out. On route she leaves the suggested fee, ranging anywhere between \$5.00-\$30.00 (varies according to the *mikveh*’s location)<sup>12</sup> with the woman at the front desk. End scene.

The above summation presumes, of course, that everything runs smoothly. This is almost never the case. Invariably, there are kinks and cracks along the way, confusing mishaps and

---

<sup>12</sup> Every individual *mikveh* is uniquely operated and financed, so it is hard to characterize all *mikvehs* as running one way or another. Some run independently, which means that they are funded primarily by the fees of those who attend, and others are privately funded by donors. Some operate as extensions of the synagogues in which they are housed. While many *mikvehs* are housed in synagogues though, they need not be. The Sheppard *mikveh*, for example, located in midtown Toronto (my *mikveh*) is not housed in a synagogue but is rather maintained by the funds accumulated by the fees they collect from attendees per visit. Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto, largest synagogue in Thornhill, offer their congregants an annual *mikveh* membership, in which one fee covers the cost of twelve visits per year, *bedikah* cloths at a slightly discounted rate, along with other perks. *Mikveh* fees are based on multiple factors including how densely populated the area is (urban centres are naturally more expensive), how large the *mikveh* is and when it was last renovated. The Village Shul *mikveh*, located in midtown Toronto, contains a single *mikveh* pool and charges \$18.00 per visit; conversely, the Sheppard *mikveh*, which contains seven *mikveh* pools (five of which are private) and has been recently renovated, charges \$22.00. (Of course, if someone is unable to pay, the fee is waived.) *Mikveh* attendants volunteer as a community service and are not provided a salary, though it is common practice to provide one’s personal attendant with a tip. One commonality between all *mikvehs* is that, while often run by synagogues, they service the entire community and not just synagogue members.

colourful events that make for an exciting *mikveh* preface and performance. It is precisely these kinks that are the focus of this chapter. I intend not to iron them out but rather to contextualize them – to map them onto a more textured landscape of a *mikveh* picture. In this chapter, I set out to understand the *mikveh* event as a single element of an ongoing sexual consciousness that moves in and out of the physical architecture of the *mikveh*. This consciousness suggests a grander ontology of *mikveh* ritual, one that is gestural, ephemeral, and communal. My point is that the performance practices that take place before and after and above and below and in and through the water immersion – the elaborate choreography that swirls around the *mikveh* moment – establishes an important public that I refer to as “*mikveh* community and discourse.” Some of the women in this chapter disidentify with the traditional ritual immersion laws and enact *mikveh* performances critically and creatively.

Before I continue, it is important to note that, when I first began conducting research for this dissertation, I was twenty-three-years old and unmarried – an outsider, but not entirely. I was inside enough to access the information. I had a multitude of contacts in the *frum* community as well as two sisters older than me who were practising the *mikveh* themselves. Still, there were things they didn’t share – things that nobody shared – which only surfaced after I became married. No one spoke about their *mikveh* misfires, for example – instances when they couldn’t or wouldn’t practice the law because it was impractical or just too hard. No one shared the pain of feeling alienated and lonely during times of *niddah* for any number of reasons, one being that either they or their spouse lacks the verbal communication skills to compensate for a lack of physical intimacy. Now, in my mid-thirties, having practised these laws myself for three years while I was married, things have changed. I have discovered this material anew and my perception of past source material has changed. I remember my sister-in-law comforting me one

week after my wedding – “They’re called, “*niddah* fights,” she said, explaining how common it is to argue more with one’s spouse during the *niddah* period when the couple cannot physically touch. Women spoke about some of the material and geographical challenges they faced when practising the *mikveh*, but few (if any) spoke explicitly about the emotional and psychological toll it took. And no one, to be sure, spoke of simply choosing not to follow the law, an option more apparent to me than ever as a practitioner of these laws. “I was supposed to go to the *mikveh* on Tuesday” a friend said to me one Sunday afternoon, six months after I was married, “but then Pinchas and I had a fight and had make-up sex. Whoops.” I don’t believe this admission would have been made before I was married. I now see my former status as an outsider at the time of this research more acutely and in my narrative I highlight both statuses.

The instruction manuals that women are given for the *mikveh* task, which include oral and textual components, are part of a historic tradition of passing down this information from one generation to the next. Because of the complicated nature of the pre-*mikveh* procedure, the specifics of which I will discuss shortly, the letter of the law seems necessarily impossible to enact. There are so many rules, so many details, and the nuances are infinite. The letter of the law (i.e., the rules in the books) and the spirit of the law (i.e., the way these rules play out in the actions of actual bodies in space) are misaligned, and what results is a contest between them – a framework for the law to compel its own transgression. The unattainability of ideal compliance facilitates a situation where women can find freedom in choosing to submit to a system of laws. They celebrate that while they *could* break the law (and no one would know), they nevertheless will their actions with sincerity and intent.

This chapter explicates a cluster of regulatory laws set forth by a patriarchal authority that, however unexpectedly, ground meaningful, sincere, and pleasure-filled practices – indeed,

lifeworlds – for their female practitioners, as well as a special kind of agency that privileges doing over undoing and creating over dismantling. I look at the performances that surround and support the *mikveh* act (a woman’s physical immersion into water) – the preparatory practices that swirl around the *mikveh* moment – and analyse how these messy, fumbling, *imperfect* collective enactments are important, even critical sites of orthodox Jewish culture, though they are rarely read as such by those outside of the community. These practices create an arena for women to reflect, question, and choose (or choose not) to participate in orthodox law, while gesturally registering physical intimacy and sexual desire in the process. In the pages that follow, I hope to illustrate how both phenomena – the practice of the law and the registering of sex – can and do occur in inextricable concert.

In 1995, UC Berkeley Jewish studies Professor Rachel Biale wrote a new edition to her book *Women and Jewish Law*, the aim of which was to include women in a conversation about *halacha* from which they had formerly been largely excluded and to provide them with the tools to comprehend *halachic* reasoning, study past *halachic* rulings, and finally, formulate their own views on *halacha*. Biale limits her study to the law itself, collecting *halachic* sources that address problems and conflicts in women’s daily lives that require *halachic* decisions, from the minutiae of the laws of *kashrut* in their kitchens to the momentous problems of marriage, divorce, procreation, abortion, and rape, as a first step toward drawing women into the circle of the *halacha*. In her book, she states,

Law sometimes lags behind social reality and sometimes anticipates it. At times attitudes change in popular mores and behavior, and only later enter codified law, while at others the law may permit much more than popular history will tolerate ... A social history of Jewish women remains to be written. (Biale 4)

Indeed, many social histories have been written since, including *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, a collection of essays edited by Judith R. Baskin, and several texts by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that describe how women utilized ritual events such as the charity fair, the Purim ball, and the Hanukkah pageant to establish space in the public sphere and to engage in dialogues about their private lives. Building upon Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's scholarship on how the role of the Jewish woman has altered her status in the public arena and how empowering and socially supportive bonds between women have been formed, this chapter speaks to the precise and explicit ways that women perform the laws that govern these public (and private) ritualized events. In one way, such performances do not (and cannot) measure up to the ideal of the law; while, in another, negotiations with the law shape and carve out the very infrastructure of Jewish spirituality and culture.

Methodologically, I learn from the ethnographic models of Stephanie Wellen Levine's *Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Chassidic Girls*; Judith Davis's essay, "The *Bar Mitzvah* Balabusta: Mother's Role in the Family's Rite of Passage"; and Norman Lamm's *A Hedge of Roses*. I also reference Daveeda Goldberg's master's thesis, *The Semiotic Reasoning of Orthodox Judaism: The Rule of Law and the Practice of Gender in Modern Jewish Marriage*, and texts written by and for orthodox Jews, including Tehilla Abramov's *Secrets of Jewish Femininity*. I gained valuable ethnographic material from four formal interviews conducted for this study. My interviewees were women of Eastern European Jewish heritage who practise varying levels of orthodoxy in the Jewish community in Toronto. They were all in their early thirties, had been married two to six years, and had one to three children. Interviews took place at various junctures between September 2008 and October 2010. All four women identify as right-leaning (*Yeshivish*) orthodox and practice the laws of *niddah* to

some capacity.

My ethnographic material is partially auto-ethnographic and partially comprised of the interviews I conducted. I use pseudonyms in all cases to preserve confidentiality. I spoke to twenty-three women over the course of my eight years of fieldwork; only four of these women are illustrated in this chapter. How did I choose which women to include in this study? This question requires some context. I do not believe I adequately acknowledged, even to myself, how tricky the research for this study would be for me, in large part because I didn't anticipate the themes that would emerge, some of which do not easily coincide with *Charedi* ideology. Additionally, I wasn't conscious of how torn I felt as a member of the community I intended to research. I therefore had one, semi-conscious criterion for participants: open-mindedness. This presented as people who, quite simply, I felt comfortable approaching. This criterion was ad hoc; I solicited those who would not have a problem discussing the topics required of my study, some of which are considered taboo, like *niddah*, abuse, *shidduch* dating (orthodox dating practices) going "off the *derech*" (a colloquialism referring to being off the orthodox path) and so forth. This limited my methodology, but was necessary for me at the time to feel safe as a researcher. I approached individuals that I knew relatively well, trusted, and felt were genuine and would speak honestly.

This sole criterion of "open-mindedness," which I recognize is abstract and highly subjective, meant to me that my interviewees would be open to speaking about topics that 'shall not be named' (like those taboo subjects mentioned previously) and would be comfortable speaking about sex and sexuality. As a researcher, one of my objectives was to explore intimacy with some degree of literality and explicitness, which is not considered culturally kosher in many *Yeshivish* circles. This limited my interviewee selection significantly. Many of the women I

knew were hesitant to discuss sex. My fear of being judged negatively based on my desire to research gender and sexuality led me to seek interviewees who were open-minded in the sense that they would not pass judgment and could potentially see the value of this kind of academic inquiry.

My challenges in seeking “open-mindedness” speak not only to the context of my methodological choices but also to the way the orthodox community functions. The importance I placed as a researcher on this singular factor shaped the quality of the research since it led me to explore more progressive enactments of orthodoxy. One of the effects of this methodology was that I ended up speaking to a lot of *Ba’alei Teshuva*, people who were raised secular and became orthodox, and another was that certain themes emerged throughout my interviews that I had not anticipated: searching and checking, emotion and affect, deliberation, process, and relational dynamics. My discoveries around ritual as reflective, critical, and as sites of sexuality and desire drove the ethnography forward.

Four women are foregrounded in this chapter, Shoshana, Leah, Gaby, and Maayan, all of whom share certain basic background characteristics. They all live either in or around a quadrant of Toronto spanning from Eglinton to Lawrence Avenue, an area of the city populated by many Jews who identify as orthodox and contain pockets of markedly *Charedi* communities, are married, and are between the ages of 20-39. These were my only predetermined criteria for the participants in this chapter. Interviews were on average between two and three hours. All names have been changed to pseudonyms. I knew all participants in advance of the interviews from the community, and solicited them via e-mail and in some cases in-person at community and social events.

It turned out that all of the female participants I interviewed for this chapter are mothers, university educated, and were either secular, conservative, or modern orthodox before they became *Yeshivish* or *Charedi*. Regarding the fact that they all are mothers, I believe this is due to the fact that orthodox *mikvehs* are only open to married women who observe the laws of *niddah*. Since rabbinic orthodoxy discourages the use of contraception as a general rule – though it is permitted under certain circumstances and is *paskened* (legislated) on a case-by-case basis – it makes sense that many of the women I spoke to would have children. When I was soliciting interviewees, I only knew a couple of women who were married without children, but I did not know them well and therefore did not feel comfortable approaching them. Not only did my participants need to trust me, but as a person living in this community, I needed to trust them.

The fact that the women in this chapter were all either secular or modern orthodox at one point in their lives speaks once again to my initial criterion of approaching women who are open-minded. This is most certainly not to say that all secular or modern orthodox people are open-minded, nor that all women who are “*frum* from birth” (F.F.B.) are close-minded; however, F.F.B. women are often raised to believe that it is inappropriate to speak openly about sex (ironically, one of the reasons why the laws of *niddah* are so important, a point I discuss further in chapter two), which is why it seems logical that the women I considered more open-minded in this regard turned out to be *Ba’alei Teshuva*. The fact that they are all university educated seems to follow this logic as well.

Of course, each of these women has a unique and distinct approach to her religious practice, stemming from (though not defined by) her individual path to orthodoxy. Leah’s sensitive and rigorous intellect led her to teach challenging courses at the community high school for girls; Gaby is an ardently religious soul who cherishes her faith and infuses it in her

worldview; Maayan is of proud Israeli heritage and spends her free time reading books on *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (trust) in God. Shoshana is a seeker and a teacher, and treats her role as a *mikveh* attendant with the spirituality of a mystic and the scrupulousness of a surgeon. These women share a deeply spiritual nature while belonging to different synagogue congregations, each its own unique variance of the orthodox sect. Leah and Gaby belong to the same, well-established synagogue whose mission is to offer an atmosphere of *Avodah* (service of God) and a place for rigorous Torah learning of all levels. Maayan belongs to an Israeli-style synagogue, a more casual site for communal prayer located in a Jewish high school. This congregation is self-directed and does not employ a formal rabbinic figure. Shoshana belongs to an inclusive, family-oriented synagogue for which she is a volunteer *mikveh* attendant, a branch of a larger outreach organization devoted to providing dynamic programs and services to the community while adhering strictly to orthodox law.

Methodologically, I adopted Stephanie Wellen-Levine's approach to ethnographic research, who follows the wisdom of Carol Gilligan, that uses initial interview questions as pathways to discover the concerns of particular individuals, rather than sticking to a hard-lined interview protocol. My approach was nondirective, which gave interviewees freedom to interject or redirect at any time, and my interviews were moderately scheduled. I prepared questions but encouraged interviewees to veer away from them and share the thoughts and experiences they found crucial. While each interview was only conducted once, they each took several hours; all four women were happy to share their particular *mikveh* stories.

My own subject position as a researcher is important here, as I conducted these interviews more than a decade ago; now, as a woman in her mid-thirties and at one time a practitioner of *mikveh* law, I have new interests and concerns, and would add new questions to

this study. For example, I would want to hear more about the moments in between *mikveh* encounters – the fifty shades of grey (or red, as I call it later in the chapter) between the *mikveh* cycles that cause women to engage in conversation about the law with their rabbis and friends. I would be interested in hearing about the ritual “misfires,” the moments of inconsistency or incongruence where either the law is not practiced or is practiced “incorrectly.” I would want to learn more about how women choose to perform this law as is my experience – if that language resonates with them and if that choice is deliberate or conscious. (The performance of the law is conscious, to be sure, but the language of choice around the law may not be.)

As an ethnographer interviewing women more than ten years ago, I played it relatively safe. I was acutely aware of the sensitive nature of this material and, in asking my questions, deliberately underplayed its sexual explicitness. I made it clear from the outset, when sharing my research objectives, that this project was not a critique of the *mikveh* but rather an exploration of it from a performance perspective. I sensed that the women I interviewed, while ‘open-minded’ enough to be selected, were probably not comfortable discussing the inner workings of their vaginas, and I was not even prepared for that line of questioning as a researcher. Even still, these interviews were a kind of provocation – not so much in terms of questions asked as much as themes invoked. The focus of this study is itself a provocation, as it addresses not only the patriarchy of these laws (though not stated explicitly in the interviews) but also the very specific subject of female nudity and genitalia. I also believe that the very process of drawing attention to these themes, even with a line of questioning was indisputably soft, was a provocation for women to consider and identify their own relationship to sexuality. One of my original guiding principles with this project was the Foucauldian idea of “talking sex” that this kind of ritualized action sets forth. This precept has endured throughout.

In this chapter I describe the *mikveh* ritual and illustrate the preparatory practices involved in anticipation of the *mikveh* performance, including bodily and spiritual practices. I then explore the ways in which speech and gesture establish a *mikveh* practice that works collaboratively and in tension with the written text. Finally, I speak to the gendered public formed in the *mikveh* environment, examining how the *mikveh* space acts as a kind of “secret” that creates key social bonds between women in orthodox Jewish communities.

This chapter aims to theorize *mikveh* ritual vis-à-vis the experiences of those who practise them and situate it within larger conversations around publics and community. I understand these experiences as a rich source of data about contemporary North American orthodox Jewry and, in particular, the evolving enactments of female identity within this group. For the *mikveh* (as well as other rituals this dissertation discusses), women engage in a process of searching and negotiation: they search their bodies in a cleansing ritual, a process that precedes (and indeed defines) the *mikveh* event, and through this practice, they negotiate a living relationship between the written law and the socio-spiritual matrix they create.

The chapter asks the following questions: What is considered Jewish sexuality in orthodox Jewish communities and how does it interact with spaces that are designated as Jewish? How do the performance practices involved in the “striving toward” a *mikveh* ideal produce a public that forms the very infrastructure of Jewish spirituality? How do the laws of *mikveh* in motion operate for women as a complicated socio-spiritual dance that stands in for and also reimagines the written corpus? If individuals and communities idiosyncratically use the ritual process to negotiate developmental change by facilitating change and stability simultaneously (the general consensus of scholars over the past two decades) (Davis 126), how do *mikveh* rituals promote change in the context of continuity, maintaining the status quo while celebrating social

transformation?

Historical Context

In *My Dear Daughter: Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and Education of Jewish Women in Sixteenth-Century Poland*, Edward Fram conducts a genealogy of women's education in Jewish culture, beginning in the 1500s. He writes,

Twenty-first century women ... have any number of opportunities to familiarize themselves with the laws of *niddah* [the spiritual state of a woman, either when she is menstruating or after, before she immerses herself in the *mikveh*]. If they are not taught in a formal classroom situation, they can easily find this information in books or even on the Internet. How did sixteenth-century women learn all the rules and regulations of such an intimate subject? As in other areas of ritual life that concerned the household, it would seem that their primary source of information was other women, be they mothers, grandmothers, sisters, sisters-in-laws, or friends. Since women taught other women the laws of menstruation, when practical questions arose they naturally turned to the same sources for answers. (Fram xiv)

This oral tradition evolved into what are now known as '*Kallah* Classes,' designed specifically to teach brides the laws of *mikveh*. Relationships formed as women waited for their turns to bathe, which led to the construction of *mikveh* waiting rooms. These spaces, as my ethnography indicates, are currently significant sites of conversation for orthodox Jewish women. Women wanted to discuss the laws. They wanted to share how they felt, too. From this sprung dialogue and mutual support on emotional and spiritual levels.

While oral traditions and embodied rituals have always been central to orthodox Jewish life, Judaism is a text-oriented culture and has become even more so over the past century. My father taught me that ‘in the old country,’ if there was ever a *halachic* (Jewish legal) question of whether to do something the way a book says versus the way your family did it, you always went with what your family did. But all of that changed after World War II, when Judaism became a text-based culture. Nowadays, according to my father, “everyone is trying to ‘out-machmir (stringency)’ each other”; who can do it the best and the strictest, according to the written text?

In his article “Migration, Acculturation, and the New Role of Texts in the Haredi World,” Haym Soloveitchik argues that, in pre-war Europe, Jewish law was manifest in two forms: the canonized written corpus and the everyday folk customs of the people. In the European shtetl, modelling and imitation was a valid and authentic way of transmitting religious culture (197-231). According to Soloveitchik, the Holocaust destroyed long-standing folkways of villages and ghettos, resulting in a shift toward a more text-based tradition. Daveeda Goldberg states in her master’s thesis that “the Jewish culture of organic community formation was transformed into conscious, deliberate, articulated dogma” (4). Goldberg argues that orthodoxy was able to survive the destruction and upheaval of the Holocaust because of its enduring basis in text, which renders it, “as a culture, pre-treated for exile and dispersion” (4). Soloveitchik posits that the shift from oral to textual communication of religious institutions was slow at first and then sped up significantly after the Holocaust. The large increase in publications throughout the twentieth century, including the distributions of lengthy codifications of *halacha* made possible by the modern printing press, is emblematic of a need for Judaism to remake itself (“Migration” 200-202). Goldberg argues that

the authoritative texts of post-war, [North] American Jewish Orthodoxy create a subtly different Jewish world – as knowledge is more and more accessible, and therefore, more and more closed to interpretation. Further, ‘what everyone knows’ is shifting out of the realm of custom, habitus, and ‘recipe knowledge,’ and becoming formalized through textualization... Jewish orthodoxy today comes closer than ever to being a true text-culture: one that is highly self-conscious, literalist, and idealistic. (5)

The shift from oral to textual that Goldberg articulates is imperative in understanding the contemporary obsession with performance (i.e. hyperperformance) in orthodox Jewish culture to which this chapter speaks. Paradoxically, the problems that arise from the embodied performances that stem from such a highly textualized culture become a new set of uniquely contemporary concerns, which accordingly determine a new kind of oral tradition – one that is distinctly performative and swirls around and between and through the written corpus, rather than existing outside of it. The ever-complicated dictation of religious dogma has, ironically, created new possibilities from a perspective of performance pedagogy. “In a text culture,” Soloveitchik states, “behavior becomes a function of the ideas it consciously seeks to realize” (“Rupture” 72).

In the ethnography that follows I analyse how women perform written laws related to the *mikveh* diligently and intricately, and how this very discipline has created new avenues for embodied performance, mindful enactments, and community formation.

#### Mikveh Ritual: An Overview

According to Jewish law, men and women who are married are obligated to observe a series of highly intricate laws, known as the laws of *Taharat HaMishpacha* or “family purity” (Fram 94), that govern a woman’s menstrual cycle. These laws essentially outline a sexual schedule for

married couples on which *mikveh* performances are based. When a married woman is menstruating, she is in a state of what is called *niddah* in Hebrew, often translated as “spiritual impurity.”<sup>13</sup>

The term “impurity” has specific negative connotations in English that it does not have in Hebrew. I feel compelled to clarify that this dissertation does not consider *niddah* as dirty, or a woman as polluted when she is considered “in *niddah*” (during menstruation and the seven days that follow); rather, *niddah* is spiritual state in which she is situated. Interestingly, men can also be in *niddah*; for example, after certain seminal emissions [“*zera*”] and other forms of genital discharge [“*ziva*”]. The idea is that one is considered “in *niddah*” if he or she has in some way experienced contact with death (literally or symbolically). This can be with either a physical dead body or its spiritual equivalent.

The majority of contemporary rabbinic authorities agree with my caveat and, in fact, do not translate the term *niddah* as “impurity.” This is because, in dealing with notions of purity and pollution across cultures, anthropologists have often seemed to forget the fact of translation, treating the concept as though it were the same in each culture. As Mary Douglas famously claimed, the status of impurity in any culture is a consequence of something’s moving beyond the bounds of cultural reason. For her, what is impure is inevitably “abominable”; as is, by implication, the source of the impurity (1). From this perspective, in all those cultures where menstruating women are considered ritually impure, the meaning is that their bodies are in some way grotesque. Understanding impurity as metaphoric uncleanness, however, does not align with many Jewish sources or with Jewish practice and experience. Goldberg, for example, relying on Lamm, makes the excellent point that, besides menstruating women, another possible

---

<sup>13</sup> Parts of this chapter appear, *mutatis mutandis*, in my essay “Performing Jewish Sexuality,” printed in book *Performing Religion in Public*.

source of Jewish impurity is a Torah scroll: if someone touches a Torah scroll his hands are to be considered “*tameh*,” impure (Goldberg 8). A Torah scroll is perhaps the most sacred object in Judaism, and so its status as a potential source of impurity cannot possibly connote any idea that it is inherently or characteristically polluting (Lamm 8).

In practice, the laws of *niddah* are often viewed as separate from other forms of *tum 'ah* (which is a larger body of law surrounding ritual impurity, like coming into contact with a dead body). The multiple forms of *tum 'ah* are not usually understood as situated under the umbrella of a singular philosophical principle. Samson Raphael Hirsch, however, joins the two strands together. He defines *tum 'ah* broadly, as a kind of spiritual impurity associated with death or decomposition (Hirsch cxvii), as something “not corresponding to your being” (Hirsch 317). He states, “The effect of *tum 'ah* is that *taharah* (purity) i.e. the capacity to live a pure life, disappears, and the Divine Presence is withdrawn” (310). The connections Hirsch draws between *tum 'ah* and death and *taharah* and life support a reading of *mikveh* as a practice that marks an ontological shift (from death-ness to life-ness), rather than that which merely cleanses the body post-menstruation.

According to Jewish law, physical death occurs when a living, material thing ceases to exist; spiritual death occurs when there is the loss of life potential. Rituals involving spiritual (im)purity steer individuals away from any type of mixture between life and death. In the case of a woman’s menstrual cycle, there is a loss of life potential, which means that if the woman were to have sex with her husband, they would be mixing life and death. To avoid this, she immerses herself in the *mikveh*, which brings her from a state of *niddah* into a state of *taharah* (spiritual purity), at which point she is permitted to have intercourse with her husband. Rachel Adler

argues, in her essay “Tum’ah and Tahara: Ends and Beginnings,”<sup>14</sup> that “menstruation is an end which points to a beginning” (63). She views the shedding of menstrual blood, which carries the potential for new life, as a token of dying. Adrienne Baker adds, “[B]ut the human life cycle encompasses death and birth” (156); while a woman is *tum’ah* and “connected with death” (i.e., the loss of potential life) she must withdraw from acts that affirm life. “Then,” Baker states, “at this time of dormancy, she must be *taharah*, ‘reborn,’ by immersion in living water” (156).

The bathing process is symbolic, not literal (it does not physically cleanse the body, as is evidenced by the shower and the bath the woman takes beforehand to cleanse her body), yet it also functions tangibly as a kind of doing gender. The ritual purity, though symbolic, is registered on the body through intentionality and embodiment, marking it. When a woman prepares for the *mikveh*, she is required to meticulously examine her body – in a sense, stage-managing the ritual, as she considers every fine detail of her physical body in space. In effect, symbolic and physical forms of purity work together at the *mikveh* to realize Jewish philosophies of sexuality.

The female subject remains in *niddah* throughout the duration of her cycle, which is approximately seven days, and for an additional seven “clean” (bloodless) days post-menstruation. During this time, husband and wife are not permitted to have sexual intercourse or, according to mainstream orthodox rabbinic authorities, any physical contact whatsoever. Once the period ceases, the woman immerses her entire body in the *mikveh*, which is technically a body of rainwater but more often one that is collected in a small pool in a designated room in a

---

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, after this article was published, Adler repudiated the views she previously espoused in an article entitled, “In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity.” This repudiation, however, was challenged by women who found her original piece so formative in their religious self-perceptions and development in Jewish law that they refused to accept it.

synagogue or community centre. Some bathing houses exist on their own, unaffiliated with a synagogue or Jewish organization.

It is important to note that the *mikveh* spaces to which this study refers are those that adhere to right-wing orthodoxy and are used to mark either a menstrual cycle (for married women only) or a conversion to Judaism. *Mikvehs* certainly exist outside this box whose missions are pluralistic and inclusive, welcoming both traditional and creative *mikveh* uses. For example, Mayyim Hayyim, located in Newton, Massachusetts, fosters new uses of the *mikveh* for the twenty-first century community (men, women, and children), such as healing rituals following illness or loss or celebrating a milestone such as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. These facilities create opportunities for Jewish individuals to experience the *mikveh* on a broader scale, as the practices are not limited by gender or religious purpose; that is, these *mikvehs* are not used solely by women in conjunction with their menstrual cycles, as is the practice of right-leaning orthodoxy. Similarly, the recently renovated Reform Mikvah (sic) of Greater Toronto is a *mikveh* that has been reimagined as a place for women and men to celebrate different life cycle events, to seek comfort after the death of a loved one or in the aftermath of a traumatic event, or to have a meaningful and/or spiritual experience. More radical uses for the *mikveh* are offered by Marla Brettschneider in her book *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*, in which she suggests the *mikveh* as a site for Jewish queer individuals to perform coming-out rituals. She states, “If we were to ritualize the coming-out experience in a communal rather than individual or private way, we might work to problematize this interesting dynamic in which many people feel acceptance or achievement and exclusion at the same time” (79). Brettschneider speaks of her experiences as the coordinator of the JQTT (Jewish Queer Think Tank), a project of Jewish Activist Gays and Lesbians (a New York City–based political activist group), in which she facilitated conversations

around staging such a practice. One man, she notes, offered the imagery of the “‘living waters’ in Jewish tradition, which could be reclaimed and used in ritual to symbolize ‘the fullness of life after the death of the closet’” (79). Based on the premise that the *mikveh* has traditionally been used in the Jewish cisgendered, hetero-patriarchal control of women’s bodies, this practice would “reclaim mikvah [sic] and its symbolism and reconnect it with ... sexuality and gender in nonconformity in new ways” (80).

Now is a good time (and an important time) to think about the *mikveh* institution differently, as sex and sexual abuse is being spoken about in ways it never has before on a global scale. How does or can the *mikveh* factor into the landscape of abuse and suffering? How does or can the *mikveh* be a social service to individuals suffering? How can progressive re-creations of *mikveh* practices be utilized as a resource to help and support Jewish women in need? Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse exist within this population as it does every other, and the *mikveh* has the potential to be used as a key social service for female survivors of sexual assault.

#### A Woman’s *Daf* (Page)

Ilana Kurshan wrote a memoir entitled *If All the Seas Were Ink* (for which she was awarded the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature in June 2018) which documents her experience discovering *daf yomi*<sup>15</sup>, Hebrew for “daily page” of the Talmud, in the wake of a painful divorce. She details the many ways in which the Talmud revived her from the bone-crushing grief of her marriage ending; the discursivity of learning the page a day, no matter what (or else she’ll be on the ‘wrong page’ the next day), the ability to be in solitude and community at once (even when

---

<sup>15</sup> Tens of thousands of Jews worldwide study in the same *daf yomi* program (the world’s largest book club), following the same *daf* (page) per day, in seven and a half year cycles (the length of time it takes to complete the entirety of the Talmud consisting of six orders and 37 tractates).

learning individually, one is still part of a group larger than oneself), the consistency of the practice (on particularly rough days, she accounts, her “Talmud study was an anchor, if not a life raft” (14)), and the challenge, which she compares to running a marathon – the idea setting impossible goals and then slowly making them more possible (4). Kurshan explains how the process shaped her relationship to time, viewing it “not as a mark of age but as an opportunity to grow in wisdom” (4).

I love this memoir because it describes so masterfully the beauty and the magic of Jewish ritual; it illustrates how tradition, repetition, and process can invigorate and revitalize the spirit. And I am fascinated by how Kurshan, a woman who practices *kashrut* and Shabbat and many other Jewish laws traditionally characterized as orthodox, journeyed into a male-dominated performance practice. “I was the only woman,” she recalls, “but the rabbis greeted me with a welcoming smile and I soon became one of the guys” (12). Although she documents her experience entering Talmud classes in Jerusalem populated solely by men as uneventful, dismissing this act would be a mistake. Kurshan’s move was courageous.

More precisely, Kurshan characterizes herself throughout the book not just as “one of the guys” but as a kind of Talmudic man:

It soon became clear to me that by the Talmud’s standards, I am a man rather than a woman – if “man” is defined as an independent, self-sufficient adult, whereas “woman” is a dependent generally living in either her father’s or her husband’s home. In some ways this was a relief because I could regard the Talmud’s gender stereotypes as historical curiosities rather than infuriating provocations. The Talmud did not offend me because I was defying its classifications through my very engagement with the text. (10)

Kurshan's formulation is that, as an orthodox Jewish woman (or at least a woman who practices many of the laws traditionally viewed as such), one can a) study Talmud and b) view the Talmud's sexist rhetoric as historically curious and not be angered by it. I love this approach; it presupposes the Talmud as patriarchal a priori and isn't frightened or alienated by that fact. Kurshan is not wrong in her assertion that, according to her actions, she would be viewed Talmudically as more male than female. However, the logical extension of this claim – that in order to be Jewishly assertive and engaged and critical, one must, essentially, be a man – is a problem. It follows the very thinking that Diana Taylor and others refute, which is that textual study is higher on the totem pole than oral and embodied traditions. It has to be that there are other ways for orthodox women to feel empowered in their Judaism than by simply emulating men. "I found myself carried along for the ride," Kurshan writes, "caught up in the flow of the argumentation and tossed around like a rough wave when the back-and-forth between the rabbis became particularly stormy" (8). Indeed, this is the kind of ritual engagement that much of North American culture is comfortable with and deems legitimate: textual study and scholarly argumentation. Less popular is the notion that women can reflect and engage and identify and seek pleasure through more ethereal practices, like ritual baths and spiritual purity laws.

When I was married, the *mikveh* was my *daf yomi*. It was where I found comfort in the discursive, sought solitude and community at once, and enjoyed consistency, challenge and pleasure, much in the same vein as Kurshan with her daily *daf*. It is time to start viewing the *mikveh* on the same playing field as *daf yomi*. I read the *mikveh* as rigorous engagement rather than passive and by rote.

I believe that theorizing *mikveh* practice from a contemporary standpoint involves reframing the way we read and perceive it. As a traditionalist, I don't believe the modern *mikveh*

is an institution that is limited to the objective of spiritual healing (though I think that it can help to heal wounds and should be utilized as a resource for women who are suffering). In terms of divorcing the *mikveh* from the menstrual cycle to which it is rabbinically tied – that would be like observing Shabbat on a Tuesday: while possibly meaningful for some, it is not my practice. As a researcher (and as an orthodox Jew) I am more interested in exploring the possibilities that emerge from within the rules of orthodoxy, which is in this case from within the homosocial, patriarchal, and intrapersonal conversations around the laws of menstruation (i.e. the dialogues between women and women, women and rabbis, and women and themselves). These discourses can be uncomfortable to look at because they are glaringly patriarchal and sometimes sexist, but are essential to analyse nonetheless, not in a reductive way (merely admonishing it), but in an open, nuanced, critical way, through in-depth ethnography.

I do contend on a more global scale that a more liberal approach to traditional uses of *mikveh* is incumbent upon the Toronto Jewish community, specifically, a more pluralistic approach to the *mikveh*. Rabbi Howard Morrison wrote an article in January 2017 for the Canadian Jewish News imploring the community to “expand their horizons to the diversity of the rabbinates” (Morrison) and to finally establish a “true community mikvah [sic]” – one that houses immersions for conversions, for example, of all denominations. A more pluralistic approach to the *mikveh* as an institution will only help to bridge the damaging and unnecessarily division of sects in the Jewish community in Toronto specifically. (Morrison speaks of his experience as a rabbi in areas of the U.S. including Union, New Jersey, and Wantagh, New York, in which he oversaw immersions of a more dynamic nature in orthodox *mikvehs* – something that is far from common practice in Toronto.) There are currently twelve operating orthodox *mikvehs*

in Toronto and Thornhill, and none of them, to my knowledge, practice such a pluralistic approach.

The particular demographic of this study, therefore, is married women who adhere to a strictly orthodox interpretation of the *mikveh*, using them almost exclusively (though there are exceptions) as a spiritual marking after menstruation in order to begin a new cycle. The belief is that, after her immersion in the *mikveh*, the woman becomes *tahor* (from *taharah*; purity), spiritually pure, once again, and she is ready to have intercourse with her husband for the two weeks before her next cycle is expected to begin (Abramov 50–56). The timing of the *mikveh* is such that it marks the end of a two-week separation, where husband and wife are not permitted to touch. When a woman immerses in the *mikveh*, she begins a new cycle of physical and sexual contact with her husband. Jewish law encourages this new cycle to begin with sexual intercourse the night she returns from the *mikveh*. While there is no explicit accountability for a woman's use of the *mikveh* (there isn't a roster of names at the front desk that indicates when a woman is scheduled to menstruate or whether she has fulfilled her monthly duty), the practice has been so deeply normalized in the (orthodox) Jewish calendar of a married woman that, on the scale of the community as whole, it is a given. On the scale of the individual, however, the practice is not a given. There are an infinite number of opportunities for a woman to look the other way, to turn a blind eye, to pretend not to see, and to deny the fact that she is, in fact, in *niddah*. There exists in these moments the possibility of *not* doing – of *undoing* – the law, of counteridentifying; so for many, the *mikveh* moment is ultimately a celebration of that freedom not to do and of that choice nevertheless to do the law. Gender theorist Saba Mahmood articulates this freedom as “entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple [acts that] inhabit norms” (15). How

limiting it is to understand agency merely in terms of opposition; rather, Mahmood suggests, agency ought to be considered in terms of doing, mindful enactment, and consciousness.

Embedded in the choice to do or not do the law is the more personal choice of whether or not to have sex on *mikveh* night. Three of the women I interviewed, Leah, Gaby, and Maayan, all expressed that intercourse directly following the *mikveh* is essential and found pleasure and comfort in the consistency of that rule; however, they also noted that there are exceptions. If one person feels physically or emotionally unwell, they all noted the well-known *halacha* that it is permissible to abstain from intercourse. I chose not to probe interviewees further on whether this has ever been their case; even as a quasi-outsider, I intuited that this would cross a line, as it would enter the domain of inquiring about their personal sex lives. Having been married myself and have practiced the *mikveh* (as an insider), I can speak from my own experience, and I will say that during the times when, for whatever reason, intercourse does not occur on *mikveh* night, the feelings of freedom and agency previously described and constituted by performing the laws on an ongoing basis are even more pronounced, because the *mikveh* experience is not contingent on another. Personally, in such instances, I feel that the *mikveh*, and by extension, my sexuality, is not just figuratively but literally my own, as it is detached from the act of intercourse. Though far from ideal from an emotional and spiritual standpoint, this is a poignant and somewhat illustrative experience: to attend the *mikveh* with the knowledge that intercourse will not follow. It harnesses some of the latent agential energy contained but not always expressed in the *mikveh* performance.

It should be noted that there does exist in the orthodox Jewish community (as I'm sure in other communities) religious sexual abuse, which involves one party imposing sex on the other

under the pretence of religious obligation. In the documentary *One of Us*, Etty speaks in horrifying detail about the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse she endured in her marriage.

As the years went by in my marriage and I was having more children, the abuse was escalating ... his control became insane. Friday night sex was mandatory. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I couldn't walk, I couldn't leave my house. I was hospitalized for depression and anxiety. I was trained: motherhood only. The human being behind fell apart. (Ewing)

Etty lives in a Chassidic community in Brooklyn, New York, but religious abuse exists everywhere: the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma of being forced to transgress religious law as well as the abuse that comes with being robbed of one's faith. Though I was not conscious of reading for abuse during the interviews for this study, in retrospect, there was no evidence of abuse determined. It is critical to acknowledge, however, that sexual abuse occurs in the orthodox Jewish community in Canada. The National Post published an article in July 2011 entitled, "Sex Abuse Issue Emerging in Orthodox Jewish Community," detailing how the rabbinical court was dealing with the "long-hidden issue of sexual abuse in Montreal's Orthodox Jewish community." Diane Sasson, the executive director of Auberge Shalom, a centre for women and children affected by conjugal violence, states "that the Jewish court is acknowledging the existence of sexual abuse is a sign of progress" (Scott). Multiple cases of sexual abuse and assault have been reported against individuals including school teachers in orthodox Jewish circles in Toronto, covered by numerous reputable publications. Sexual abuse within *Charedi* communities is, without a doubt, a huge problem in Canada.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> I did not observe any signs of abuse in the interviews I conducted. My observation was that religious pressures influence both husband and wife equally to consummate the *mikveh* act with sexual intercourse.

## *Mikveh*: A Production

A play entitled *Mikveh*, which ran in Toronto in 2018 and was produced by the Harold Green Jewish Theatre, deals with troubling issues including domestic and religious abuse. Penned by Israeli playwright Hadar Galron and published in 2004, *Mikveh* is a play that takes place in a Jerusalem *mikveh*. With eight female characters, the play explores how community is formed as a reaction to oppression and adversity; thus, it is only when one of the characters is almost beaten to death by her husband at the very end of the play that all the characters, in an act of desperation (that, unfortunately, was not theatrically or dramaturgically earned), band together and form a community and a support system.

I had the privilege of working as a consultant for this production. I was approached by Liza Balkan and asked at the outset (approximately three weeks before rehearsals commenced) to be in ongoing conversation with the cast and crew in order to “ensure the show’s authenticity” (Fraiman). While I happily accepted Balkan’s generous invitation and had a meaningful experience working with the company, I contested the characterization of my role as to “ensure authenticity,” as I categorically reject the idea that any religious practice can be considered “authentic” from the outside. So, I created a new one for myself, an undefined consulting role more akin to spiritual dramaturge than the ‘kosher police.’ The evolution of this role was interesting: it began during my first cup of coffee with Balkan, when she asked me to explain the difference between Chassidic and *Charedi* streams of Judaism. This conversation led to many others of a diverse nature, ranging from grand Talmudic dialogues to the minutia of the how to wear an orthodox headscarf (and which type of headscarf correlates to which orthodox sects, of which there are dozens). She asked me to speak to the cast about my own experiences at the *mikveh* and what the practice means to me. I went through Galron’s script with a fine-tooth

comb; I would be asked to define Hebrew (and orthodox) jargon, and would respond that, like every language and culture, every colloquialism is nuanced and idiosyncratic, nodding to one sect or winking at another, sarcastic or wry or satirical or crass... I couldn't possibly capture the meanings behind every pregnant pronoun or allegorical allusion. Language was such a vital part of Galron's script, as it is the *Charedi* vernacular that sets the stage (and the tone) of this story. I became friendly with the all-Jewish cast, speaking individually with every actor at least once. My conversations with the women in this extraordinary all-female cast were enlightening. Many had heard of the *mikveh* but few had prior exposure or first-hand experience. They were interested in the ethos of the *Charedi* lifeworld. I recommended books to read and websites to peruse. One actor asked me for music recommendations; what would her character listen to in her closed, isolated pocket of Jerusalem? I sent her a dozen Jewish songs, Israeli and American singer/songwriters whose lyrics are almost solely comprised of biblical verses. Another actor asked what orthodox elementary schools were like, and I sent her promotional videos Bais Yaakov elementary schools, in which girls (one of which was my niece!) are depicted chanting Jewish prayers and reading scripture. It was a pleasure to learn the laws of *mikveh* with the women in this production and to facilitate a conversation about their practical and socio-spiritual uses. I was asked about my state of mind when immersing in the *mikveh*; was I anxious, like the Tehilla is in the play, or was I bubbly, like Estee? Was I ever resentful, like Miki, or did I ever stop to gossip, like Hindi? I took them through my process and my mental state and shared a number of examples, which, they informed me, helped to colour some of their pre-existing images of the goings-on of an orthodox *mikveh*. I expressed how genuinely exhausting the process is, the multiple showers and the rigorous scrubbing and combing. I said that I was often anxious, like Tehilla, but for my own reasons (not because I didn't want to sleep with my

husband, which is her reason), and that I was often excited, like Estee. I explained that I never stop to chat, like Hindi, not because I am immune to gossip but because the *mikveh*, in particular, is such an acutely spiritual state of mind; I didn't even feel comfortable socializing. I described how my mind felt elevated at the *mikveh* and that kind of chatter would have felt unnaturally cerebral.

Of the eight women who formed the cast, one had first-hand experience with orthodoxy and the remaining seven were of varying religious denominations. The former, with whom I formed a connection, grew up in a religious home and attended a highly orthodox *Lubavitch* (a branch of Chassidic) elementary school. At her request, I referred her to several books on the subjects of Chassidic practice and philosophy, and she responded to this material in an email to me:

*I love this [material] so much. It encompasses what I believe about God and spirituality and I always think in terms of light ... It's so interesting that this was my lineage and is a belief that I've carried with me – with or without religion – as a sense of our place in the universe.*

With this actor and others, the process of learning what had been “forgotten” – or of relearning something that had been spirituality ingrained – was incredibly meaningful. As a researcher, questions arose for me around cultural history, ritual as a kind of muscle memory, and even Jewish gendered ritual as a performative relearning, which I intend to pursue in future research.

As meaningful as this experience was, this process was a challenge for me because I felt that I was, in many ways, working against the script of the play. Galron's text generally depicts the *mikveh* as a place of stress and oppression. Tehilla, a nervous bride to be, seeks help and support from the attendant and is rejected and instructed to do as she is told. Miki is

uncomfortable with some of the immersion rituals and is denied special accommodations. Most appallingly, Chedva is obviously being abused by her husband and no one bats an eye (except for Shira, the shit-disturbing attendant's assistant who stirs everything up). Only at the end of the play do the characters band together, but for its majority the characters work together to maintain a status quo of female subjugation against a cultural backdrop from which the sexism originates. Not only is Galron's script a one-dimensional view of *Charedi* Jerusalem, it is also quite dated; even the most orthodox communities are at this point uncomfortable with the label "battered woman," and would offer more support for domestic violence beyond just sucking it up. There are moments in the script, however, that do lend themselves to a more generous reading of the *mikveh* – that Chedva's daughter loves going to the *mikveh* with her mom, the sparse moments of peace that Shira harnesses amidst her taxing work day to enjoy an immersion, and, perhaps the most compelling, the play's opening scene, where Estee immerses in the *mikveh*. A wordless scene, this is a poignant moment, of which the direction could determine the audience's perception of this ancient practice. Balkan used this scene as an opportunity to depict some of the beauty and serenity of the *mikveh* experience, a directorial choice that I hope my source material influenced.

The way Galron sets up her play is almost as problematic as its content: the *mikveh* is established as merely a house that *hosts* protest and community rather than as an actual *site* of protest and community. The difference is subtle, but significant. The moments of community formation and social protest in the play – that is, when the women band together in support of the "battered wife" – are framed almost in opposition to the *mikveh* acts that occur throughout. A more interesting, and in my view, more fruitful approach would have been to actually *address* the *mikveh* act – to tease out the many social and political issues in orthodox communities

*through mikveh* performances and not merely situate them at a *mikveh* house. How do women use the laws of *niddah* as forms of community and protest? What do these laws have to offer as a methodology to understand the lives of these women and the choices they make? How might they be a way into learning about the infrastructure of this society and the rules that govern it? While these themes were, perhaps, gestured toward, they were not explored. I see this script as a missed opportunity to articulate something; Galron's representation of the *mikveh* is dramaturgically lacking, as it reflects an extremely outdated perspective on Jewish femininity.

At this moment in history I believe there are more productive questions than, "Is the *mikveh* patriarchal?" We can agree that it is, but is that really still the point? What comes next? Can we ask some more specific questions, like, What spiritual purpose, social function, or global project does the *mikveh* serve, and what does it stand (in) for in the lives of orthodox women? What spiritual essence or ideal does the law strive toward, and what is productive (or not) about this ritualized reiterability? Can the *mikveh* be read solely as a spiritual practice, one disconnected from sexual relationships? How is the *mikveh* a site of more progressive enactments of disidentification and criticality? These are questions I believe to be worth pursuing in scholarly and theatrical contexts.

God is in the Details

The key to answering these questions is paying attention to just how specific, explicit, and methodical the *mikveh* preparations are on a practical level. The rituals are as large as bathing an entire body and as small as combing out even the tiniest of tangles. In fact, many of the laws involve combing and managing of body and head hair (Forst 175–77). The first step when preparing for immersion is a thorough cleansing of the body. Then the woman begins to untangle any knots in her head or body hair. The symbolism behind the rituals of combing and cleansing

is that nothing stands between the subject's skin and the *mikveh* water during the immersion (Fram 71). The woman removes anything that can potentially act as a barrier between her flesh and God. This includes tangles in the hair, dead skin, bodily fluid (including wet or dry blood), and other materials that may sit on the body's surface. Once this process is complete, the woman enters the *mikveh* foyer, greeted by a volunteer attendant.

The very fact that this ritual involves so many details has religious significance. In her analysis of the mother's role in the Bar Mitzvah ritual, Judith Davis discusses how a mother's efforts toward the Bar Mitzvah milestone have fundamental meanings in terms of her emotional development and that this meaning can be seen from the perspective of the details (134). Davis cites Maurie Sacks' study of how women prepare *shaloch mones* (Purim snacks to be shared with others), specifically, that the details of the preparation contain an "embedded love message," a message that implicitly connects mother, family and community (Davis). To the extent that feminist psychology understands women's emotional development in terms of a capacity to connect, the developmental value of *mikveh* ritual depends precisely on the details as to how a woman performs it.

One of the reasons this practice is important is because of some of the perceptions held by those outside of the community: that *mikveh* practices are inherently oppressive and that they presuppose that a woman is dirty when she is menstruating and that acts relating to her *niddah* are embarrassing and shameful. The contemporary rhetoric on the subject has scarcely changed since the eighties and nineties: women and men admonishing the orthodox for preserving an archaic practice that stigmatizes and oppresses women for their biology. Rabbi Susan Grossman comments on this in her essay, "*Mikveh* and the Sanctity of Being Created Human."<sup>17</sup> She states,

---

<sup>17</sup> The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), the central authority of *halacha* for Conservative Judaism, was asked in the early 2000s to comment on how Conservative Jews should observe the laws of

Much has been written about the cultural and psychological significance of the menstrual laws ... The development and observance of these laws in Judaism have been criticized as reflecting the primal fear of blood, as reflected in cultural blood taboos, and the casting of women as “other” in a society defined by men. (2)

After an extensive analysis of the laws pertaining to *niddah*, citing the Mishnah, Gemara, and various historical and *halachic* texts, she concludes that “Conservative congregations would be wise to ignore customs restricting menstruants because they ... certainly do not reflect contemporary sensitivities among observant Conservative Jews nor general society, which no longer considers a menstruant a potentially dangerous force or contaminant” (11).

In *Feminist Perspectives on Religious Texts*, Judith Hauptman critiques a similar view held by Jacob Neusner (a scholar who laid the foundation for feminist readings of rabbinic texts and should be credited accordingly). In his taxonomical analysis of the Mishnah’s data on women – that is, his attempt to understand why the framers of this rabbinic corpus discussed some issues and left out others – Neusner concludes, according to Hauptman, that the framers often marginalized women because they viewed women as “abnormal, anomalous, dangerous, dirty, and polluting” (qtd. in Hauptman 44). Hauptman argues that Neusner’s labelling of woman in this way suggests that these qualities are characteristic only of ritually impure *women*, which is not the case. It is not possible here to engage in a larger discussion of the Talmudic imperatives of ritual impurity; however, I will say that Neusner’s suggestion that impurity is female-specific has certainly dominated most feminist readings of *halacha* and ought to be addressed.

As an ethnographer, I am particularly interested not only in the views of scholars but also

---

*niddah*. Three responses were created as a result, including Grossman’s paper, which was accepted by CJLS on September 13, 2006 by a vote of 14 in favour, one opposed, and four abstaining.

in those of individuals outside of academia. For example, when reading Elizabeth Baskin's master's thesis, "The Community Mikveh: An Invention of Tradition," I was struck by the perspectives of some of her interviewees. In her section entitled, "The 'Ick' Factor: Prior Negative Perceptions of the Mikveh," Baskin notes that, for many of these women, their issues with the *mikveh* had to do with their perceptions of the ritual as sexist. She writes that "Lisa viewed the laws of *niddah* and family purity as particularly unsettling." She quotes Lisa's words: "I thought in general, the *mikveh* could be a sort of oppressive or misogynistic concept. That women are unclean and they have to clean and all this stuff and don't touch them" (52).

Indeed, this is the view of so many when it comes to the *mikveh*. It seems that the opinion of many feminists on the topic is that these practices may only be supported on the condition that they are divorced from the laws of *niddah* and are reimagined as symbolic gestures, marking life cycle changes and spiritual transformations. In an article recently published in *Haaretz Israel News* entitled "In New York, Women Forge a New Path to the Mikveh," Debra Nussbaum Cohen discusses how ImmerseNYC, a pluralistic, feminist, Jewish organization dedicated to deep ritual experiences and educational programs, has helped many to gain access to the *mikveh* in performing "non-Orthodox, unconventional ceremonies." Cohen interviewed Jennifer Silverman, a woman who, after learning that she carries the BRCA genetic mutation, decided to have her ovaries and breasts removed to avoid the risk of developing cancer. Cohen writes that Silverman had known *mikvehs* as "something sexist, antithetical to the way I was raised." However, "a feminist immersion," Silverman states, "a whole reconceiving of the traditional ritual – felt right" (qtd. in Cohen). A similar experience can be seen in the series *Unorthodox* (discussed in chapter one). The central character, Esty, who has fled her orthodox community in the U.S., finds friends at a music conservatory in Berlin; soon afterward, Esty finds herself at a

beach with this new group and walks into the lake wearing full Chassidic garb. When the water reaches her waist, she removes her *sheitel* (wig), drops it in the water, and watches it drift away, exposing her hair publicly for what is presumably her first time since being married. She dunks her entire body in the water – a ‘kosher’ immersion (but not, since she’s clothed) – so that even the hairs on the top of her head are immersed (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 36:15-38:10, “Part 1”). In this scene, the lake is her symbolic *mikveh*, representing the start of her new life of freedom.

I believe such feminist re-imaginings of *mikveh* performance practices are valuable and open up infinite possibilities of what ritual can do and be and mean for individuals on all kinds of paths. The immersion innovations that Mayyim Hayyim and others provide are invaluable service to dynamic Jewish communities as is Brettschneider’s work with JQTT. I also believe, however, that there are more progressive performances of the *mikveh* that can be researched and analysed from within a traditional power structure – phenomena upon which I will elaborate in the pages that follow – and that these enactments can be spiritually powerful and socially empowering for women, too, and ought not be dismissed outright as sexist and oppressive without an understanding of the lived experience of their performers.

I would like to speak for a moment about the context in which my ethnography is situated before moving forward with analysis. As an outsider, a researcher that began this study having never practised *mikveh* ritual before, and also as an insider, someone who practiced it for over three years, I can attest from both viewpoints that members of the *Yeshivish* community in Toronto do not speak openly about sex. As previously stated, Toronto’s *frum* community is notoriously puritanical. In an article published by *The Canadian Jewish News (CJN)* in 2016 entitled, “Modern Orthodoxy at the Crossroads,” Lila Sarick writes that

[while,] on the face of it, modern orthodox Judaism is thriving in Canada ... the vibrancy of modern Orthodoxy that comes from the tension of balancing the demands of secular life with traditional Jewish tenets also contains the seeds of schism ... The movement continues to grapple with “hot-button issues,” including the role of women in religious life and how the Bible is interpreted.

She goes on to report that, in Montreal, conversely, modern orthodoxy is alive and well. She also states that the Rabbinic Council of America in the United States, which represents orthodox rabbis, has repeatedly endorsed more liberal approaches to social issues such as religious prenuptial agreements that prevent women from being considered *Agunot*, a *halachic* state where a woman is contractually “chained” to her marriage, a huge social issue facing Jewish communities today. These rabbis remain the “lone voice” in Canada, says *CJN* columnist Rabbi Martin Lockshin.

I know many who have ventured outside Canada’s borders in order to escape what they experience as toxic homogeneity. This has likely further contributed to the observations of so many who view these traditions as repressive. However, what makes the *mikveh* such a valuable institution is precisely because and not in spite of this fact. The laws of *niddah* function as a language for orthodox women to not only to discuss desire (in a way that is socially acceptable), but to embody, gesture, and articulate subjective sexualities in social, public forums that make Jewish sex explicit. Thus I ask: What is Jewish space in a contemporary context? What is the significance of the *mikveh* as a site for women to congregate and speak explicitly, for Talmudic law to be enacted and supported, for sex to be discussed and gesturally articulated? What is important about that fact that orthodox women form publics through meticulous *mikveh* choreography?

Reading French philosopher Michel Foucault's writing about sexuality into *mikveh* performance offers an interesting angle from which to analyse Jewish sex. In the first chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits that, up until the mid-seventeenth century, sex was spoken of candidly; "sexual practices had little need for secrecy" and "words were said without undue reticence" (3). Two centuries later, things were different when, for the Victorian bourgeoisie, sexuality became carefully confined to the home. Foucault argues that at this moment in time, when it came to sex,

silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law ... A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. (3)

He goes on to argue that it was precisely the increased *regulation* of sex that led to more frequent sexual discourse. People were given a certain licence to speak liberally about sex, and this led to a regime of the self-same "power-knowledge-pleasure" that sustains discourses on human sexuality today (11).

In a Foucauldian vein, is not the *mikveh*, therefore, a site of extreme regulation that, perhaps counter-intuitively, produces a discursive explosion around sexuality? If we look at these practices through a lens of oppression, viewing these acts as unthinking and by rote, then we ignore the ethnographic data that portrays criticality at the heart of the *mikveh* as a practice and as an institution. The *mikveh* is certainly a space for Foucault's "talking sex" (77), whether verbal or gestural, which merges spirituality and sexuality in mindful, evocative ways.

My objective in this chapter is to debunk the myth that orthodox women who practise the

*mikveh* necessarily do so passively and without pleasure, undermining the assumption that the regulations surrounding female sexuality in this context are merely, as Foucault might say, “repressive.” My hope is that the ethnography that follows demonstrates this by examining three key areas:

1. **Mindfulness and criticality:** the meticulousness involved in *mikveh* preparations produces a culture of observant, mindful, and critical women.
2. **Sexual consciousness:** the women who practise *niddah* are deeply engaged in an intensive process of checking their bodies. As a result, these women have established a heightened relationship to sexuality, which includes being deliberate about sex with their husbands, navigating their own feelings of arousal and anticipation, and committing to nourishing and sustaining their sex lives.
3. **Public, space, and discourse:** the *mikveh* creates communal support, social bonds, spiritual space, a vocabulary with which to speak about sex, and perhaps most importantly, **a critical discourse** explicitly *for* orthodox women. This is a public based on shared language, pleasure, and knowledge.

It is through these three lenses that I present ethnographic material that I have spent the past ten years collecting and articulating. It is my hope that this data will help to contextualize the complicated choreographies of Jewish sex that follow.

I also attempt to answer the question of whether the *mikveh* can stand alone as a spiritual practice, independent of a woman’s menstrual cycle. On the one hand, the women I spoke to made an ontological distinction between *mikveh* practices and their regular lives, carving out, when they were married, a new spiritual dimension of experience that changed their lives forever. On the other hand, this new reality was inextricably tied to a sexual schedule facilitated

by orthodox marriage. When marriage ceases, according to orthodox law, so does the *mikveh* practice. The mark that has been imprinted on these individuals, however, does not disappear. It becomes fused with their worldview and self-concept as orthodox Jews.

#### Mindfulness and Criticality

In the paragraphs that follow, I present excerpts from my conversations with Leah, a *rebbetzin* in her mid-thirties and a mother of six at the time of this interview, and Shoshana, a *mikveh* attendant in her mid-forties and a *Ba'alat Teshuva*. These interviews were, in many ways, my first exposure to *niddah* and *mikveh* as Jewish forms of sex and intimacy. They offer insight into the intense meticulousness of action required of the women who perform *niddah* and *mikveh* rituals and into how these practices teach women to be observant, mindful, and deliberate.

#### Shoshana

Shoshana is thirty-eight years old, lives in Toronto, and is a mother of four at the time of this interview. She invites me into her home one afternoon in mid-August, and, in a conversation that lasts two hours, she shares with me her experiences serving as a volunteer for a synagogue affiliated with an orthodox outreach organization located in mid-town Toronto. Shoshana is a *Ba'alat Teshuva* and has performed the role of *mikveh* attendant for the past ten years. She ushers me into her living room of her house around Eglinton Avenue West, an area of Toronto largely populated by non-orthodox Jewish families. Shoshana was not orthodox when she first married and only began practising *mikveh* and other laws upon her second marriage. She has two children from her first marriage and two from her second.

I ask Shoshana if she can walk me through the *mikveh* event and what leads up to it. I knew that, before the *mikveh*, women were instructed to clean themselves thoroughly, but I was

not exactly sure what that entailed. Shoshana proceeds to describe the preparatory practices for the *mikveh* as she would for an outsider, in accordance with her training by her affiliated outreach organization. She explains that women must prepare their bodies for immersion prior to entering the *mikveh* site:

Before going to the *mikveh* you have to count seven-clean-days. You have to see no blood whatsoever on the *bedikah* cloth [a particular fabric designed for vaginal insertion that is used to determine whether or not the subject is still bleeding from her menstrual cycle]. Then you can begin to prepare for the night of the *mikveh*, which includes a bath beforehand. You have to make sure that all of your body parts and orifices are completely clean. You clean your bellybutton, the insides of your eyes, your ears ... The bath has to be at least half-an-hour long so that you can soak completely. You make sure that your nails are cut short and are clean underneath, that there's no dead skin on your feet or hands, that your nail polish is off, that you don't have hang-nails ... You make sure your teeth are brushed and there's nothing in between your teeth ... Lots of dental floss ... and Q-tips for your belly button and your ears and nose. You make sure your hair's all combed out ... that it doesn't have any tangles, even under-arm hair and private hair. You don't use conditioner because it doesn't fully wash out ... If you have false teeth, you make sure they're in properly ... braces too ... everything has to be in its right place. For those who are undergoing chemotherapy, and they have a centre line or a PIC line, that might be an issue ... There are special ways of dealing with that, too. You basically have to make your body the cleanest you possibly can be so that nothing can interfere between you and God. (Shoshana, Interview, August 2009)

Shoshana was trained by a woman who ran this particular *mikveh*, which is affiliated with an outreach organization, in a course she undertook with two other women. Her training consisted of four weekly sessions that lasted two to three hours at the synagogue of which she is a member. The woman who ran Shoshana's course inherited a curriculum from another woman who works at a larger, more established synagogue in Toronto. Shoshana's instructor modified the curriculum to suit the needs of such a small group. The curriculum for this is divided into seven units: A) *Mikveh Checklist for Friday Night or Yom Tov (holidays)*, B) *Mikveh Attendant List for Friday Night and Yom Tov*, C) *Halachos (Laws) for Mikveh Attendants*, D) *On Erev Shabbos (Shabbat eve) or Yom Tov...* E) *Mikveh Checklist for Second Night of Yom Tov or Motzei Shabbos (Shabbat's end) which is Yom Tov*, F) *To Tell Ladies Before Shabbos...*, and G) *At Mikveh Before T'vilah*. In true Talmudic fashion, the course units are minutia-oriented and highly colloquial. The course is driven by the *halachic* details of the *mikveh* with the goal of learning how to effectively (*halachically* speaking) supervise immersions. The global themes of the course are more socially focussed (and more abstract) but are not written down: the role of the *mikveh* attendant, the meaning behind the *mikveh*, and how to identify signs of abuse. In many ways, this four-person *mikveh* attendant training course is methodologically emblematic of the larger methodology on which this dissertation focusses: inordinately detailed instructions made explicitly stated and transmitted, while more abstract concepts of faith, intention, and meaning remain implicit, only truly realized in the doing and the performance.

That said, Shoshana does say that she was taught to observe demeanour more generally, on an emotional or energetic level, while supervising an immersion.

The other thing [the attendant will] do is notice if a woman is really agitated. Sorta like, if a she's really not looking forward to going home afterward. A good *mikveh*-lady will

check not only the outside stuff but also the deeper stuff. She'll catch marital issues ... signs of abuse ... She'll see how things are really going with the women in her community.

When I ask Shoshana what she does when she discovers a situation of abuse, she informed me of multiple organizations in Toronto that are resources, including Jewish Family and Child Services and Relief. Offering as much support as she can, Shoshana does her best to set women up with the resources they require.

Shoshana's words also describe how, on a basic level, *mikvehs* are places where women become naked; situations of domestic abuse are difficult to cover up when the cuts and bruises are quite literally exposed. On a spiritual level, she describes how the *mikveh* practitioner is emotionally or psychologically exposed in the *mikveh* room. The very practice of public nakedness that occurs here distinguishes it from other cultural performance spaces in Jewish life. Bodily nakedness seems to cue spiritual nakedness in this environment. Perhaps part of the symbolic cleansing at play in *mikveh* spaces is an element of vulnerability – a kind of purging of emotional toxins in anticipation of intimacy.

So incredibly detailed are the preparations for the *mikveh* act, I could scarcely wrap my head around them. Little did I know at the time that these acts were the tip of the iceberg compared to the endless *bedikahs* (vaginal checks), complicated *zmanim* (specific times of day – including sunrise and sunset when particular *niddah* practices must be observed), and the bizarre gestural vocabulary required before even stepping foot in a *mikveh*. These critical observances are set up to infuse the month with spirituality and sexuality. The acts of checking one's body so carefully – one's bellybutton, eye crevices, earring holes, teeth, hair, nails, and so forth – as Shoshana describes in detail – establish a mind-body connection that infuses the body with

spiritual meaning or import. In this way, the acts to which Shoshana refers produce a performance regimen that I consider to be a discursive, mindful practice.

Leah

Approaching her tenth year of marriage, Leah was thirty-one years old at the time of this interview and is a mother of six. She lives in the ‘*cholent* pot,’ i.e. the heart of *Charedi* Toronto surrounding the Bathurst and Lawrence intersection. Raised modern orthodox in Toronto, Leah became *Charedi* in her twenties. She attended orthodox Hebrew Day Schools until her high school graduation, after which she attended university for a four-year bachelor’s degree. She currently teaches Torah subjects such as *Chumash* (in-depth study of the Torah and its commentaries) and rabbinic law at an orthodox high school for girls. I was twenty-three when I spent two-and-a-half hours interviewing Leah in her living room of her Bathurst and Lawrence bungalow in mid-town Toronto. I remember feeling simultaneously envious of her life and relieved it wasn’t my own – not yet, at least. Her toddler was playing on the carpet beside us and several of her young children tugged for her attention over the course of our interview.

When I ask Leah about her typical *mikveh* night (the *mikveh* part, not the sex part), she uses the terms “waiting” and “counting” multiple times. In many ways, orthodox female sexuality is characterized by deliberate acts of “waiting” or anticipating; the *hefsek* (the first *bedikah*), the *moch* (a special vaginal check performed before the *hefsek*), the fourteen subsequent *bedikahs* (two performed per day), the hour-long preparation for immersion on *mikveh* night, the overarching, constant awareness of and engagement with the body, are all physical acts of “waiting” – a proactive waiting – in service or anticipation of the *mikveh* moment. It’s not only the physical preparation, she communicates, but the emotional as well. “The whole day before you go to the *mikveh*,” Leah says, “in your head you’re mentally

preparing – ‘How am I gonna do this, how am I gonna have time to prepare, how am I gonna ... Because you’re gonna make sure that you go’” (Leah, Interview, September 2008). I understand what Leah is saying here – the preparations carry an emotional weight. My impression of Leah’s words (and perhaps this reflects my bias as a previous practitioner of these rituals) is that her expressions of urgency are not based merely on stress, but rather, on the importance of these acts. Such discursive practices weigh heavily on women, as they did on myself when I performed them; however, the weight is not a burden but rather an opportunity for purpose and meaning. In speaking to Leah, my sense is that she enjoys the weight of these practices because they contain purpose.

I know from my own past experience that my state of mind during the preparatory practices – that is the *bedikah*, the cleansing, the combing, and the bathing – was enormously impacted by whatever the current dynamic was in my marriage. The waiting, counting, anticipating, and so forth were coloured by the particular matrix of interpersonal communications and material/environmental factors at play. While exhausting, these experiences also serve to infuse the *mikveh* experience (and the sexuality of the marriage more broadly) with intentionality and spiritual import. In effect, it is an extremely mindful, deliberate practice that requires women to take pause and reflect on their physical and emotional well-being.

An enormous, often under-examined aspect of *mikveh* ritual to which Leah refers several times during our interview is the laws pertaining to the two weeks prior to *mikveh* immersion: the period stage and the seven-clean-days stage. These laws relate to the checking and counting the woman undergoes in order to ensure the spiritual integrity of the *mikveh* immersion. If these preparatory checks and counts are not performed properly, the *mikveh* act is not in good faith.

Five days after a woman begins her period, she is permitted to begin the vaginal checks that will commence the seven-clean-days stage. These checks are called *bedikahs* (interestingly, the same term used for Passover-checking rituals, upon which I will elaborate in chapter three) and require the subject to wrap a small, white, cotton fabric (available for purchase at the *mikveh* at the rate of \$3.00 per pack) around her index finger and insert it inside her vagina, performing a vaginal sweep. In her *mikveh* manual, *The Secret to Jewish Femininity: Insights into the Practice of Taharat HaMishpacha*, Tehilla Abramov describes the *bedikah* process in depth:

Wrap the cloth around the index finger. Be careful with long fingernails, because they may cause scratching. A suggested position for maximum comfort is to lift one leg up on a chair. Insert the finger, the cloth wrapped around it, into the vagina as deep as possible. The entire finger should be inserted. Slowly and gently, rotate the finger inside the vagina to check all folds and clefts. Continue rotating the finger, as you direct it from deep inside back out while gently pressing on the vaginal canal. (88)

Abramov explains that the rotating motion is intended to detect any drop of blood that may be left in the many folds of the vaginal lining. Rotating with a soft cloth is most efficient; a tampon, in contrast, does not reach the crevices.

Reading this, I can't help but acknowledge the obvious fact that women are being instructed, in no uncertain terms, to perform daily practices of touching themselves. Abramov's language in her directorial notes is specific and direct, spelling out precisely the posture, pressure, and procession of this ritual event. Ironically, situated in a culture of women who resist explicit talk of sex are instruction manuals that do exactly that, and in no uncertain terms. Of course, this is a practice prescribed by and regulated by men; the result, however, is a daily practice that supports mind-body consciousness. There is pleasure for many women in having

knowledge of the laws and also power in their freedom to touch themselves within this highly regulated structure. It is imperative to understand, however, that the sexual awareness brought about as part of the *bedikah* acts needs to be understood as happening in tension with this kind of patriarchal surveillance.

Leah was the first person to teach me about the *mikveh* as a site of sexual desire and anticipation. I had never before encountered this ritual as more than a female-specific commandment. Leah's description clued me into the *mikveh* as an exciting event on the marital calendar to which women look forward.

During our interview, I ask Leah about her experience with the seven-clean-days after menstruation. Her response described feelings of anticipation – a process of counting. Leah looked forward to her time at the *mikveh* by counting down the days, as the *halacha* prescribes (clean days one to seven are marked by *bedikahs*, vaginal checks). As she did this, she also counted down the days until she had intercourse with her husband. In this way, the law worked toward/with human desire and Leah actively processed her sexual identity during the time that she was not physically present at the *mikveh*. “*You wait in a process of counting,*” she said. “*You’re counting those seven days and you’re saying: ‘OK, I have six days left, I have five days left, I have four days left ...’*”

### Sexual Consciousness

This section focuses on *niddah* and *mikveh* practices as a site of heightened sexual consciousness and pleasure for women. It explores how *mikveh* practices like *bedikahs* demonstrate a mindfulness specifically around sexuality and establish a platform for women to relate intensely to sexuality, desire, arousal, and anticipation. I return to some of Leah's words and present some of my own experiences, impressions, and interpretations of *mikveh* rituals. Partially auto-

ethnographic, this section jumps back and forth in time, speaking to how my first impressions of *niddah* and *mikveh* changed over the years, citing various personal experiences of my own doing *bedikahs*, counting days, consulting my local rabbi, and immersing in the *mikveh*. Placing my personal reflections in conversation with the ethnographic research I conducted pre-marriage, I aim to illustrate the possibilities for pleasure and fulfillment that take shape in a highly regulated religious context.

Fast forward to 2020: now that I have been married and divorced, Leah's formulation seems obvious. In my own life, the *mikveh* became a kind of code between myself and my girlfriends for a rescue remedy. I survey my phone for old texts messages with friends that convey this:

“Shlomo and I just had a huge fight but BH [short for “*Baruch Hashem*,” Thank God] it's *mikveh* night tonight.”

“What happened w Dovid? r things ok now?”

and

“Ya I went to the *mikveh* last night so all's good now. BH for the *mikveh* pill!” [Not a literal pill – slang for the instant *mikveh* “fix.”]

Or conversely,

“Leaving for Israel tonight for Pesach. Just got my period. *Niddah* the whole trip. Gonna b bruuuuuuutal.”

“Finally did a *hefskek* last night and then saw spotting this AM. Was supposed to go to the *mikveh* last Sunday. FML!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

When I was married, the language of *niddah* and *mikveh* was a vehicle toward an articulation of sexual desire (the subtext being that we want to be cleared for sex). These concepts became

integral to my everyday life as well as that of my friends. Part of our coming-of-age process – the transition from the rather structureless, protracted adolescence of an orthodox Jewish single into the highly-regulated structure of orthodox adulthood – was to incorporate these constructs into our marriages, friendships, and lifeworlds.

Educationally speaking, what is even more powerful for practitioners of these laws than speaking about sexuality is the material doing of them, and by this I mean those acts that include literal materials: the *bedikahs*. It is important that I expand upon what this practice actually entails. Once a woman performs a *bedikah*, she inspects “the *bedikah* cloth” to determine if it has any blood on it. If the substance on the cloth is clear, then she is, too, and may begin counting her seven-clean-days. If the substance is red, she is still considered “in *niddah*.” If the colour of the substance is anything in between then it is considered a question; in such a case, the woman is instructed to consult a rabbinic authority. Abramov has a section in her book, entitled “Typical Information to Keep in Mind When Consulting a *Rav* [rabbinic authority],” in which she states,

What day of the cycle did the woman discover the discharge? ... Was she expecting her period? ... What was its size? ... Were there any of the following conditions involved: pregnancy, nursing, childbirth, gynaecologist’s examination, gynaecological problems, fertility problems? Does the question regard a *bedikah* cloth? Does the question regard a garment? ... Was the stain found after intercourse? After urinating? How soon after? (65)

Now, here’s where things get interesting. If I wasn’t so square, I would entitle this portion of the chapter “Fifty Shades of Red,” the reason being that the gray areas that exists in between “clear” and “red” on a *bedikah* cloth – the various shades of yellow, beige, cream, orange, pink and brown that exists on this spectrum, along with all the variables and material conditions that

contextualize the *bedikah* question – seem to be infinite and open up an entirely distinct social dimension. A lifeworld, indeed.

To clarify, the ritual of the “seven-clean-days,” accomplished by performing two *bedikah* checks daily for seven consecutive spotless days, can be problematic for many women because any spotting whatsoever can interrupt them. If this occurs, the woman must begin counting anew, which will prolong her visit to the *mikveh* significantly, leaving her in *niddah* and unable to have physical contact with her husband. This can be extremely frustrating. The system in place in the orthodox community in Toronto is that any questionable stain – that is, a stain that is neither clear nor red (the two ends of the *niddah* spectrum) that a woman finds during her seven-clean-days, either in her underwear or on a *bedikah* cloth – should be shown to a rabbinic authority. In Israel and New York, women situated in the modern orthodox Jewish community receive training from *NISHMAT: The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women* (through a program called *NISHMAT’s Golda Koschitzky Center for Yoatzot Halacha*) to examine these stains and perform *halachic* rulings. This role is called a *Yoetzet Halacha*, a woman who is certified to serve as an advisor for women with questions regarding *Taharat HaMishpacha*.

The Toronto community, ever-lagging one pedal stroke behind New York and Israel, has only very recently (2019) developed an infrastructure for this type of leadership and has previously relied solely on male rabbis for these consultations. (I am currently a member of the Canadian Yoatzot Initiative committee, formed in 2019 in partnership with *Mizrachi* Canada and *Canadian Friends of NISHMAT*, an Israel-based centre for women’s scholarship, leadership, and social responsibility.) While some choose to consult female *Yoatzot*, many still choose to consult male rabbis on these matters, as the *Yoatzot* initiative is still very new has not yet become

mainstream. The result is unequivocally bizarre from an outside eye: male individuals are commenting on the status of women's underwear and it's all done in secret. Because of the intensely private subject matter that underlies this interaction, the level of discretion practised around these conversations is airtight. So imperceptible are these interactions, in fact, that unmarried people in the community are barely aware that they exist.

The silence around the *mikveh* practice accounts for my lack of preparedness for my first *mikveh* encounter. The first time I went to the *mikveh* was two days before my wedding to my now ex-husband in an area of Jerusalem called Rechavia. I had completed “*Kallah* (bridal) classes,” one-on-one sessions between a bride and a trained (albeit unregulated) “*Kallah* teacher” prior to the wedding, in which I was taught, amongst other things, the laws of *Taharat HaMishpacha*. As Esty's *Kallah* teacher says to her in the series *Unorthodox*, “Next week, after your wedding, God-willing you will begin a new life with your husband. I'm here to teach you how to be a wife” (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 0:18, “Part 2”). During my classes, my *Kallah* teacher explained to me that, while it is customary for the *mikveh* immersion to directly precede intimate relations, exceptions are made for a bride. She is afforded an interim day for beauty appointments – manicures, waxing, and so forth, – which may not be done before the *mikveh*. I had learned in my *Kallah* classes about the bathing and cleansing requirements, but in the hours before sunset, I hadn't accounted for travel time from my lodgings and the *mikveh*, so what was supposed to be an hour and a quarter of prep turned to forty-five minutes. A few minutes shy of the required soaking time, I accelerate the bathing process and hastily proceed to my shower. I gather my things and meet my mother in the hotel lobby, proceeding to the *mikveh* house.

I arrive and the attendant speaks to me in Hebrew. I understand about a third of what she's saying. She understands that I am a bride and this is my first time and ushers me into a special bridal room. She asks me a series of questions in Hebrew, using her hands as subtitles: "Have I cleaned my eyes, nose, earring-holes, and navel?" she gestures. I nod my head yes. She leaves me momentarily so I can undress and take my second shower, the final, pre-*mikveh* rinse. I remember looking at my reflection in the mirror and seeing a face with no makeup, no products, no cover, and thinking: this is how I'm entering my marriage. Just me. The attendant knocks on my door and we begin the next stage.

My *Kallah* teacher had taught me that, while dunking, it's best to drop down in a vertical line, as deep as you can, while blowing bubbles out my nose for optimal comfort. I do this, but as I dip I unthinkingly hold onto a sidewall for support. My attendant pauses after my dunk, a silence that indicates an attempt to consider my feelings, and she says in Hebrew, "*Ze tov ...*" "It is good ..." "But ..." What follows is a request to refrain from holding onto anything, including the wall, to avoid any possible interceptions between my body and the water. She also takes this opportunity to inform me that the custom in Israel is not simply to dunk directly downward, but rather to dunk down and then to bow forward beneath the water. Because I don't recognize the word for "bow" in Hebrew, I have no idea what she is talking about. I struggle to see her without my glasses and all I can hear is a distorted soundscape of Hebrew syllables. She sees I am becoming flustered and quickly demonstrates. "*Ko'rim U'Mishtachavim*" she says, quoting a daily prayer called *Aleinu* she knows I will recognize and associate with the bowing gesture. Though I have never learned or heard of the custom to bow this way in a *mikveh*, I recognize the prayer immediately and now know what to do. I am not confident in the movement in water, but perform my second dunk in this manner nevertheless, after which the attendant declares with

gusto, “*Ka-sheer!*” (“Kosher,” in an Israeli dialect). Then, I put on my glasses, recite the blessing, remove my glasses, dunk again (her way, bowing as I would when reciting *Aleinu*), receive a second “*Ka-sheer!*” and then dunk a third time, with a third and final *Ka-sheer* to top it off.

Success.

I remember feeling tremendous and immediate relief that night as I left the *mikveh*. For the previous two months, I had been taking birth control as my fiancé and I had agreed to wait a year before having children. The pill had caused sporadic spotting, which, in a *mikveh* schema, can be extremely problematic. Any staining whatsoever during the seven-clean-days requires consultation, potentially inhibiting the pre-wedding *mikveh* immersion, which would trigger a hugely complicated set of prohibitive laws for the wedding night, as the couple would be in *niddah* and physical contact would not be permitted. In fact, the laws for the wedding night are so stringent in this case, taking into account the excruciating desire the couple would have to be together that night, that they instruct a third party to sleep under the same roof as the newly married couple, to provide an additional deterrent. This situation, however, is extremely rare, as the bride and groom do everything in their power to schedule their wedding at an optimal time for *mikveh* success. It is also common knowledge that rabbinic authorities provide as many leniencies as *halachically* (Jewish legally) possible for a new bride, understanding that a *niddah* situation is a worst-case scenario.

The threat of spotting and an early period made me extremely nervous (which compounded anxiety as stress increases the likelihood of spotting), and I remember the distinct feeling of a boulder being lifted off my shoulders when leaving the *mikveh* that night. I was free. I could be with my husband.

On my way out, I witnessed a bizarre and somewhat hilarious social exchange between my Canadian mother who had escorted me there and the Israeli *mikveh* attendant. As we were leaving, my mother paid the fee and left a ten-shekel tip. The attendant, who had been so considerate to me during the *mikveh* process, proceeded to mutter something in Hebrew that my mother assumed was a polite protest, something along the lines of, “Not to worry; I don’t need a tip”; a classic social interaction between two Canadians: “Here, take this tip”; “No, I couldn’t possibly ...”; “Please, I insist,” and so forth. In this vein, my mother insisted, which is when the attendant became surly. Recognizing that her tone did not match our imaginary subtitles, we looked to an outsider for a translation. A bystander stepped in: “She’s saying that your ten-shekel tip is an insult, since you’re making a fancy American wedding, and that, if you’re going to leave that tip, you might as well leave nothing at all.” My mother turned white, reached inside her purse, and offered the attendant a one-hundred-shekel bill, which she gruffly accepted. The juxtaposition of the spirituality of my *mikveh* experience – the prayer and the contemplation – and the harsh reality of form, posture, and dollars and cents, is, in a way, a perfect encapsulation of orthodox Jewish ritual: the messy material practice of doing the *mitzvah* (commandment) colliding with the lofty spirituality of it so that the two are almost indistinguishable.

In the weeks that followed, the material conditions that determined my *niddah* experience opened up an entirely new social reality. The pill I was on caused significant spotting, and it became painfully challenging for me to complete my seven-clean-days. Every attempt was interrupted, impelling a new string of counting with every disruption. I simply could not get to the *mikveh*. After several cycles of frustration, I finally adapted to a new pill and established a more consistent body cycle. For those tumultuous few months, however, what transpired was a fascinating new dimension of my life; I was in constant consultation with a rabbi about the status

of my underwear. We spoke plainly and explicitly about the inner workings of my body. The first time we spoke, I remember being shocked by the visual: before me was a man dressed in traditional Chassidic garb – a traditional silk black coat and velvet yarmulke with a long gray beard and sidelocks to match – examining my underwear with clinical detachment, speaking to me as would my OB/GYN. A library of Talmudic legislation surrounded me, tractates of *Gemara* and Bible commentary from wall to wall. “This is normal,” I remember thinking, “and I’m only realizing it now.”

During the three-and-a-half years that I was married and practicing the laws of *niddah* and *mikveh*, I came to realize its centrality to my sexual identity. The language of the *mikveh* connected me to my body in a way that I had never before experienced. In fact, I had virtually no relationship to my own sexuality outside of physical encounters with men. What changed when I was married was that my sexuality actually became my own. This seems like a contradiction, since every Tom, Dick, and Harry (well, every orthodox rabbi in the city, at least) now became part of a public that had *halachic* “access” to it, if not literally, symbolically – from speaking openly to my rabbi about the colour of my underwear to sharing the intimate details of when my husband and I had intercourse. On one hand, that seems totally invasive; on the other hand, this is the kind of frank discussion of sexuality that is produced by a set of rules. The reason it did not feel like a contradiction was because it was through these encounters that I became and become an agent of my own body. I owned my desire, my anticipation, and my sexuality. What could previously be characterized as an ad hoc relationship to sex – one that existed only in relationship to men – became my independent sexual identity. What is perhaps the most compelling aspect about the laws of *mikveh* is that, while inexplicably tied to the rules of men, these laws actually facilitate a full-fledged concept of sexuality for women that exists irrespective of them.

## Public, Space, and Discourse

Operating in a spatial register, the present section of this chapter focuses on the tangible and intangible formations of space opened up by *mikveh* practice. In this section, I pose the questions: What is Jewish space and how is it constructed? How does the searching of bodies and negotiating of law contribute to and indeed define the construction of Jewish community? How are Jewish publics formed and how might they transcend geography? How do *mikveh* spaces exist around and between and through the *mikveh* text and practice? Furthermore, how does the *mikveh* space serve as a kind of effigy for orthodox Jewish women, a stand-in for sex and sexuality in both social and quotidian spheres?

According to Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in a fixed space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (176). Through this congregating together and engaging in dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and intellectual arguments to either affirm or challenge the state. The present study challenges Habermas’s concept of public, which is based solely on rational argumentation and debate, by describing a public counterintuitively based on privacy, silent prayer, and an internal regard for other women, as well as on spiritual discipline within a tightly knit structure of religious law. *Mikveh* space is defined and sanctified by the rituals and speech acts it contains and the meanings and pleasures experienced from these acts and the communities as a result. *Mikveh* practitioners create a community through sharing the private practices of orthodox Jewish women. This “public of the private” complicates Habermas’s ideal public sphere because it privileges silence, contemplation, practice, and an internal spiritual state. Indeed, the searching for and striving toward a *mikveh* ideal creates a concealed yet communal *mikveh* space that not

only offers meaning and pleasure to orthodox women but also functions as a vehicle for sex and sexuality and enables them to negotiate their sexuality with pleasure and freedom.

How and why does this occur? Women strive toward a *mikveh* ideal by performing complicated, detailed laws outlined precisely in etiquette texts and performance manuals. And, in the midst of this messy, complicated negotiation of etiquette texts and legal directives, freedom and pleasure is expressed. *Mikveh* publics are formed. Sex is talked about and sexuality is voiced. Women observe and negotiate their bodies via *mivkeh* waters and stage-manage sexuality via *mikveh* spaces. It is amidst this searching and negotiation, meaning-making and intentionality, that the law actually begins to make sense and communities are established. It is here that women exercise agency in personalizing their relationship to the law.

The *mikveh* is a space that is mediated as a kind of public but that also demands a strong degree of intimacy and privacy. *Mikveh* rituals require performers to practice to confidentiality and discretion. They are highly private ritual acts, requiring nudity, personal prayer, bathing, and performances of a highly intimate nature. Fundamental to *mikveh* space, however, is a community infrastructure. *Mikvehs* are generally located, not in individual homes, but in synagogues and community centres. It is impossible to perform *mikveh* practices alone. Women congregate in *mikveh* lobbies and waiting rooms before performing the ritual immersion. *Mikveh* space, therefore, can do things that other spaces cannot; it enables the female subject to process her relationship to her husband, her sexuality, and her part in the Jewish community. And further, it allows for an intimate kind of sharing between orthodox Jewish women that otherwise could not take place. In this way, the *mikveh* acts as a central site of performativity in two ways: one, as a place where ritual happens; and two, as a place where a public is hailed into being. The discursive, quiet, gestural nature of this public challenges the Habermasian ideal of the public as

a marketplace or a square for rational debate and the circulation of texts and cultural objects—and, more broadly, challenges patriarchal histories of publics. In other words, by “inhabit[ing] norms” (Mahmood 14–15) rather than subverting them, *mikveh* practitioners experience pleasure and articulate agency on *both* individual and communal levels.

I would like to draw a connection (and also create a distinction) between contemporary *mikveh* publics and those described by Michael Warner in “Publics and Counter-publics,” relating to his concept of “text” (65–66). In the same way as, in Warner’s words, publics “come into being ... in relation to texts and their circulation” (6), a *mikveh* public is formed around multiple Jewish texts, including manuals pertaining to *mikveh* performance practices, philosophical texts that theorize *mikveh* law, and biblical literature.

There are two concurrent discourses at play here: (a) the narratives and perspectives of orthodox women in contemporary Jewish culture and (b) rabbinic conversations surrounding Jewish law. Considering the latter for a moment will help to flesh out how Jewish spaces are constructed within the larger orthodox community. Jewish space begins with rituals and speech acts. Material buildings are constructed to house religious conversations and performance practices. The laws of *sukkah* (ritual huts) are perhaps the best illustration of this: the law directs the subject to build a hut with a minimum of two-and-a-half walls with any material he or she wishes, in order to house various religious rituals, including the traditional shaking of the *lulav* and *etrog* (objects with symbolic meaning), the recitation of blessings, and several festive meals. The sanctuary – in this case, the *sukkah* – is constructed to house the act, not the other way around. *Yeshivas* (Jewish study halls) were historically formed in a similar manner.

The rabbinic commentary that the Talmud documents is a formal discourse that gives rise to a public. In the modern age, groups of men gather daily to read and study Jewish law, thus

creating a *yeshiva*, one of the most essential public institutions of contemporary Judaism.

Warner's notion of the "imaginary" is useful here, as some of these conversations begin with the laws pertaining to Temple ritual, a structure and a practice that do not exist today; and the addressee is the Temple priesthood, legal authorities who also have not existed for almost two thousand years. Contemporary Jewish law is applied through these conversations.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that what is now known as *yeshiva* study (traditionally, male scholars congregating in a space to learn Torah) was once conducted in the market place. Since the majority of Jews lived in rural areas near Jerusalem and Baghdad, the market was the most convenient site for Torah study, so they congregated here for study as well as for the Shabbat *Shuva Drasha*, an annual address given by the chief Rabbi. Tractate *Megillah* of the Talmud even states that Torah recitation should be conducted on Mondays and Thursdays<sup>18</sup> specifically (which remains the practice today) because those were generally market days.

The theoretical principle that supports this tradition is a particular philosophy of Jewish space: its sanctity is contingent upon its contents. Jewish space has no intrinsic value (aside from two exceptions, the holy Temple and the land of Israel, analysis of which would exceed the limitations of this chapter). Jewish oral traditions state that even Mount Sinai, arguably the holiest site in Jewish history, was no longer considered sacred ground for Jewish believers once they left. Other rituals involving space begin from this premise as well. The traditional *chuppah* (wedding canopy), for example, is constructed around the blessings recited beneath it by bride and groom. Various other rituals and speech acts become holy in relation to the *chuppah*. The *eruv* functions similarly: one of the laws of Shabbat and of holidays is the prohibition against

---

<sup>18</sup> The Schottenstein Edition: *Talmud Bavli*, Tractate *Megilla*, 2a.

transferring objects from one domain to another (relating to the principle of rest on Shabbat). A ritual enclosure called an *eruv* is thus constructed in order to define an area where the transferring of objects from one domain to another *is* permitted during Shabbat and holidays. This enclosure (often made of wire and posts) makes it easier for individuals to congregate; without it, it would be extremely difficult for people to leave their homes on Shabbat and holidays, as they would have to ensure that they carried no objects between domains (including prayer books, keys, etc.). The *eruv* increases mobility, especially for those caring for small children, as it allows them to carry these items as well as strollers, diapers, bottles, and so forth. In the very first frame of the series *Unorthodox*, an *eruv* is depicted, representing not only a physical enclosure but also the symbolic confinement of the Chassidic ghetto in Williamsburg. The day that Esty escapes to Berlin is a Saturday, Shabbat, when an *eruv* would normally be in effect. Before she leaves she is told by a neighbour (oblivious of her escape plan) that she “can’t go out [with a bag]... the *eruv* is broken” (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 1:54, “Part 1”). As a result, Esty leaves her bag of precious few belongings behind.

*Mikveh* practice marries a Jewish philosophy of space to a cultural context. The (anti)structure of *mikveh* ritual is such that it has no fixed beginning or end. Women who practise *mikveh* law do not view the ritual bath as an end but rather as part of an ongoing ritual of sexual consciousness. The physical space of the *mikveh* is ontologically connected to its social function – that is, to facilitating sexual consciousness and intimate sharing between subjects in everyday life.

It is interesting that the online definition of a *mikveh* is body of rainwater; in fact, the construction of *mikveh* buildings goes beyond this to house conversations that take place during *mikveh* practice and gather women together. The practice therefore exceeds its immediate

spiritual function to perform a larger social function and to hail orthodox women as a public. If we are to view these conversations as overlapping performance spheres, we may begin to see Warner's description of publics in a different light. He writes,

For another class of writing contexts – including literary criticism, journalism, theory, advertising, fiction, drama, most poetry – the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal: the people, the scholarship, the republic of letters ... the brotherhood of all believers, humanity ... These are all publics. They are in principle open-ended. They exist by virtue of their address. (73)

Indeed, the addressees of Talmudic commentary, a writing context that Warner does not mention here, are “essentially imaginary.” Warner's example of the public of literary criticism offers a fruitful analogy for the public constituted as the addressees of Talmudic commentary. Both discourses are considered secondary texts; both revolve around documents that precede them, and yet, paradoxically, hold authority both independently and in relation to their predecessor texts. In a Foucauldian sense, *mikveh* discussion, beginning with the law, is a strand of “talking sex” (Foucault 77) that opens up a public based on Jewish sexuality. The laws of *niddah* function as a language with which women can speak about the subject of sex, including sexual desire, that “draw[s] from that little piece of ourselves not only pleasure but knowledge, and a whole subtle interchange from one to the other: a knowledge of pleasure, a pleasure that comes of knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure” (Foucault 77), in a manner that is considered culturally kosher. Using the law as their script, orthodox Jewish women perform the *mikveh* as well as their own sexual desire, while simultaneously negotiating a cultural politic. For example, since it is common practice in *halacha* to have sex the night that the woman returns from the *mikveh* (though, as discussed previously, this is not always the case), in the *mikveh* waiting room, when a

woman expresses to another woman an urgency she feels to sleep with her husband, her eagerness has a double meaning: it is an expression at once of religious piety and of sexual desire. Thus, *mikveh* discourse works as an abstractly addressed text that creates a public sphere where sex openly is addressed, situated within an orthodox Jewish community where it generally is not.

Orthodox Jewish women utilize *mikveh* spaces to process sexuality, articulate individual agency, establish community, and share experience. *Mikveh* spaces hail their particular publics through gestural, discursive, bodily acts, and create spaces for women to negotiate sexuality from within the law, attending to a kind of highly nuanced doing of gender (rather than to its undoing).

It is important for this analysis that we distinguish between the rituals of the *mikveh* and the public that contains it. *Mikveh* practices – including preparations and bathing – are acts that perform Jewish sexuality among orthodox Jewish individuals. In and around these acts is a *mikveh* community based on speech, textual discourse, and a kind of intimate sharing that is formed in Jewish communities.

While Jewish religion is, indeed, part of what Habermas calls the “lifeworld,” there is, of course, a gap between the Jewish and non-Jewish world, specifically orthodox Jewish women and non-Jewish women. *Mikveh* waters mark women in a way, insofar as they produce a kind of sexual consciousness distinct from that of secular culture, one that is ongoing (not merely during *mikveh* practice). Though represented in Jewish women’s dress, including hair covering and traditional modest garb, this markedness is symbolic. The intimate sharing that takes place between women in this cohort, and the secrecy of it, binds the cohort together as an intimate public. The performance practices that occur in *mikveh* spaces set these clusters of women apart from an official public, but do not aim to resist it.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's historical analysis of female Jewish performativity helps to contextualize this ethnography and give it both a religious and a social footing. She links Jewish performativity to Torah ritual and law in her exploration of the Jewish home and charity fairs, Purim balls, and Hanukah pageants (2). The charity fair in particular, she argues, was a forum through which orthodox Jewish women could engage in a dialogue about their private lives. In "The Moral Sublime: Jewish Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century America," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses the way the role of the Jewish woman altered in the public arena and the ways in which the charity fair was the performative site for this transformation:

The most powerful fundraising method in the nineteenth-century United States was the charity fair. Organized by women ... the stated purpose of these fairs – to raise money for a good cause – is not the whole story. These events did much more. They shaped public life and placed women at its center, and they did so artfully. (36)

The fairs shaped not only the experience of public life for women, but also their public identity. By virtue of their being held in public, Purim balls and Hanukkah Pageants constructed a space for women to gather outside of their homes.

In conjunction with Warner and Habermas, I also consider Mahmood's position on agency within orthodox Muslim communities (acts of agency that emerge from *within* existing power structures). Mahmood argues that the doing – that is, the mindful (re)enactment – of social norms is what provides the means for its destabilization. This "productive reiterability" is precisely where agency resides (8).

Using this theory as a lens through which to read *mikveh* practice sheds light on the meaning behind these everyday religious performances. Mahmood's unconventional reading of

Butler reorients the concept of subversion, rendering it community-specific. She situates agency within the law as opposed to against it:

Butler locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside of it) and, more importantly, suggests that the reiterative structure of norms serves not only to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/ power but also provides the means for its *destabilization*. In other words, there is no possibility of “undoing” social norms that is independent of the “doing of norms”; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability. (8)

Speaking about a rigid system of religious laws, Mahmood believes that it is possible for the female subject to attain power and agency from within that system. Further, she asserts that, under certain conditions, the very act of subversion can be misread as an act of submission, if the motivation behind the resistant act is not properly examined.

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. (14–15)

Mahmood identifies the problem of understanding subversion in a simple way. Gender theorists often equate performativity with the act of undoing – the conscious deconstruction of gender

through either reiterative performance or performance that announces itself as such (for example, the denaturalization of gender performance via drag). In contrast, this ethnography explores a second strand of performance theory. Through gestural, discursive, bodily acts, *mikveh* creates a public of the private, an embodiment inextricably tied to a public. Unlike other deconstructions of gender in performance, the methodology I use to analyse this form of embodiment does not seek to distance a subject's private agency from the control of the public's gaze. When examining acts of cultural subversion, it seems just as important to explore acts of doing that exist intentionally within the framework of the law as it is to acts of undoing that are in opposition to it. Furthermore, this concealed yet communal practice creates a public where women together seek spiritual succour and support.

Gaby

Gaby is twenty-five years old, lives in Toronto, and is a mother of three at the time of this interview. She speaks to me for three hours in the living room of her three-bedroom apartment around Lawrence and Marlee Avenue, reflecting on her early years of marriage. Gaby grew up observing Shabbat and *kashrut* but not much else, and became more mainstream *Yeshivish* when she married at the age of twenty. Like Leah, Gaby was also a *rebbetzin* by her early-twenties. Gaby attended a conservative Hebrew Day School in Toronto and then chose, on her own accord, to attend a modern orthodox high school when she entered ninth grade. Two years after graduation, she married a man who was raised in mainstream orthodox circles, and at the time of this interview they worked together for an outreach orthodox organization devoted to creating programming for assimilated Jewish youth. Gaby was not raised with an understanding of the laws of *niddah*; while her mother did, in fact, practise them minimally (i.e., she attended the *mikveh* monthly but did not practise additional stringencies), she performed them so discretely

they were almost imperceptible. Gaby was not educated in the laws of *Taharat HaMishpacha* (the laws of and around family purity, including menstruation and *mikveh*) until her *Kallah* classes before her wedding. She identifies a collapse of private and public when practising the laws of *niddah*, as she recalls her first experience attending the *mikveh*:

We got married two weeks before *Rosh Hashanah*. The first time I went to the *mikveh* after I got married was *Rosh Hashanah*. Which is crazy in itself because the *mikveh* is also supposed to be something that is extremely private, and *Rosh Hashanah* is an extremely public holiday for people to be with their families. (Gaby, Interview, October 2008)

Gaby draws an interesting comparison between the rituals of *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish new year), which many would consider public commandments, and the *mikveh* ritual, which many would consider private ones. *Rosh Hashanah* is a holiday that necessitates group congregation and communal prayer. It also usually involves the gathering of family for a festive meal. These are all public practices, which placed Gaby in an uncomfortable position: she needed to figure out a way to leave her family dinner inconspicuously in order to visit the *mikveh*, (while the meal usually begins around sundown, the *mikveh* cannot, according to *halacha*, begin before sunset, which means that the two rituals necessarily coincide) and hope that those around her do not notice that her hair is wet and she is no longer wearing makeup (the use of electricity, like a blowdrier, and the application of makeup are not permitted once the holiday commences). Further, it would have been awkward for Gaby to speak about her situation. Discussing a woman's *mikveh* schedule is considered culturally taboo in many mainstream orthodox communities, as it indicates to the public a precise time of intimacy between husband and wife.

Paradoxically, Gaby owns her sexuality within a culture that values its concealment. She illustrates how the private space of the *mikveh* amplifies the sexual energy within a marriage and the rituals that fuel it.

Everything should be sexual. The way men and women converse with one another should be sexual. I think that the way I talk to other men is a reflection of the way I talk to my husband. So I am private about my private life. When I cover my hair, and I make something private between me and my husband – that is our secret. That is our power that we hold together.

Gaby seems to be using *mikveh* ritual to make distinct or sacred her relationship with her husband. This distinctiveness – her “secret,” as she calls it – empowers her, perhaps because of the choice she makes to distinguish her speech with others in her community from that with her husband, or perhaps it is because she has come to view herself as a sexual being in some way. The concealment of her hair and by extension her sexuality is, in her view, a form of assertion.

Maayan

Maayan is thirty years of age, lives in Toronto, and is a mother of two at the time of this interview. She identifies as orthodox, though she was raised in a completely secular environment with almost no connection to Judaism and became a *Ba'alat Teshuva* later in life. Her mother was raised on a Kibbutz on the western side of Wadi Ara, Israel and emigrated to Hamilton, Ontario, in 1973 with her Canada-born husband. Maayan's parents divorced when she was in high school, which was one of the multiple catalysts that led her to search for spirituality in a prominent seminary in Jerusalem. Maayan wears a *tichel* (headscarf) to cover her hair, symbolizing her Israeli roots (*tichels* are the prevalent head-covering practice there) and her religious convictions at once. Maayan speaks to me in her kitchen as she stands at her stovetop

frying hamburgers for dinner. Practising the *mikveh* was completely foreign to Maayan after she became married, and she speaks to me about some of the taboos she discovered upon getting married.

They tell you in *Kallah* classes not to talk about who you see at the *mikveh*. So if you see someone in the waiting room and you want to tell your husband, “Oh, I saw this person,” you can’t. You need to protect their privacy, their *tzniut*. Their modesty. I guess ... in a society where there is no separation [between a time when touch is permitted and a time when it is not], you don’t really think about it, the idea that someone might be having sex. But when you have this separation, between times when you’re having sex and times when you’re not, it’s like this monumental moment. And you don’t really want to advertise it. (Maayan, Interview, October 2010)

Maayan later describes a sense of awkwardness that can sometimes arise as when she began chatting with another woman in the waiting room and then one of them was called to the dunking area: “It’s always a little bit awkward when one person is leaving and the other wishes them a ‘good night.’ There’s always sort of this subtext ... Like, ‘Have a good niiii-ght.’ Because, I mean, you both know what’s going to happen that night.”

Sex is spoken about explicitly and implicitly in this public of the private. In the passage above, Maayan subtextually alludes to an imminent sexual encounter in her conversation at the *mikveh* (i.e., what is implicit in the overly stressed vowel in niiii-ght); Gaby, however, when speaking to me behind closed doors, explicates the relationship between sex and *niddah* in Jewish ideology more graphically.

Throughout my research, I found that the concept of *mikveh* as a shared space for women in this community surfaced again and again. In both physical and discursive forms (that is, the

physical structure and also the dialogue that it produces), it is a space where women meet on an intimate level. This space has high barriers, though. It is not spoken about with others – a kind of secret club, an exclusive public. Maayan shares with me her experience when in the waiting room at the *mikveh*.

When I run into people I'm close to at the *mikveh*, in the waiting room, like my sisters, it's kind of fun. We share more of our private lives with each other than our husbands are comfortable with, so this is sort of a safe space for us to talk about our *mikveh* night. Our husbands can't really fault us for telling each other it's our *mikveh* night if, you know, we see each other at the *mikveh*. You know?

For Maayan, speaking openly about sex and sexuality is a given in the context of her liberal-progressive family of origin. Her transition to the private, discreet *mikveh* community of orthodox Toronto (described by Gaby in the paragraphs above) was an adjustment. The *mikveh* is a safe space for Gaby to continue speaking freely and candidly.

When I ask Maayan about the dynamics between women in the waiting room who do not know each other, she explains that there are certain “rules” of speech in the *mikveh* space. The space has its own set of discursive codes, which attempt to negotiate this combination of intimacy and publicness:

When you recognize someone in the waiting room – someone you know, but not very well – there's sort of a camaraderie. Something very deep and very personal is about to take place...

The sense of privacy Gaby describes seems to resonate with Maayan as well. She understands the privacy as a kind of sanctity that connects directly to the concealed yet communal quality of

*mikveh* space. The concealment is important because it preserves what Maayan calls “the sacredness” of the public that is organically and spontaneously formed.

Part of why it’s private is because of modesty, but part of it is also about sacredness. Like a secret. Its sacredness – its energy, its power – is preserved by its containment. Just like energy in a tight space. Once you open the space, part of the power is released ...

Paradoxically, the *mikveh* is very private and very secretive; as Maayan states, once you open it, the power is released. It is contained. On the other hand, all of the rituals leading up to that moment – i.e. the laws of the *niddah* – are community-making. They are a language, a system – a world. So much is passed back and forth between women and other women who are practicing *niddah*, in terms of discourse and a sharing of emotions and desires, as well as between women and their rabbis around their *halachic* state. The privacy of the *mikveh* moment is almost charged by legislative chaos of the laws of *niddah* that surround it.

As I reflect on Maayan’s words about the waiting room, my own conceptions of the *mikveh* fill my mind. I never once sat in a *mikveh* waiting room during the entire time that I practiced these laws; I was so worried that I would run into someone I knew that I would avoid it at all costs. In the summer, when the earliest time a woman is permitted to dunk is as late as 9:30 or 10:00pm (sunset), *mikvehs* tend to be quite busy, as the window for immersion is so small. During these months, I would arrive at the *mikveh* over an hour early to ensure that I was given a room immediately and avoid the public scenario of the waiting room. I remember being greeted with a friendly, confused face; “You know, *Motek* [sweetheart], that the earliest *z’man* [time for dunking] is 9:52, yes?” Part of my anxiety was vain; I didn’t want anyone to see me without makeup. Moreover, the thought of making small-talk during such a private, intimate moment, felt fake and antithetical to the spirituality of this monthly outing. In retrospect, though, I wonder

if that is really true. Perhaps, like my *mikveh* experience in Jerusalem, a *mikveh* ‘ideal’ involves recognizing materiality as co-constitutive of spirituality, hailing physicality and spirituality at once. And yet, it is *striving toward* this ideal and *my* inability to attain it – my resistance to confront the materiality my own body (my naked face) and speech (authentic social interaction) in the *mikveh* waiting room and the freedom I experience in making this struggle my own – that define my very real and very imperfect *mikveh* experience.

Because my experience is so personal, the communal aspect, for me, consists in the language and discourse attached to my “coming-of-age” *mikveh* moment. When married, my practising of these laws cracked open a new world for me, and now I wonder where community and purpose live for me as a single person. Now divorced, I now find myself asking questions around how single, orthodox people are to navigate community and sexual identity in a wider secular culture that, for all intents and purposes, does not recognize them (a theme upon which I elaborate in chapter five).

### Talking Sex

As Foucault points out, the more sex is regulated, the more people speak about sex (18). As I reflect on the words of the women I interviewed and on my own experiences, I realize how true this statement is. When I was married, the laws of sex governed my life: how I conducted my morning routine, how I showered, how I interacted with my husband. I established an entirely new dialect for speaking about sex, which included a unique genre of conversation I had with my rabbi. This dialect affected how I spoke to the women in my life; they shared with me their experiences, their birth control stories, their staining frustrations. Never before had I been privy to these conversational spheres.

Returning to my interview with Leah, and also drawing from my conversations with Gaby and Maayan, I consider what it means to have joined this society and how it shaped my attitudes toward speaking interpersonally as well as intrapersonally about Jewish sex and sexuality via religious commandment. Leah shared with me her views on the subject of talking sex:

You know what: I always tell people that, with *niddah*, I will always be open. When I got married I remember feeling like I was joining a club that I knew nothing about. Even after I took *Kallah* classes, once I got married it was like, all of a sudden people start talking. I started hearing all these things and I was like, “Why didn’t anybody tell me that before I got married?”

I recall this interview with Leah like it was yesterday; she shared her inner thoughts with me, a twenty-three-year-old Masters student, and in doing so, debunked some of the myths about sex generated within the community we share: that it’s not always roses and rainbows, as much of the rhetoric in our circles would suggest (this goes hand-in-hand with social restrictions not to speak openly about so-called taboo subjects). As Leah shared with me, I felt as though she was speaking to me not only as Shira the ethnographer but also as Shira, the young, unmarried *frum* girl (the same age she was when she got married), who was curious but also fearful of her future. She took this opportunity to educate me:

It’s like, you hear, ‘It’s so beautiful, it’s so wonderful, it’s the best thing that ever happened to my family.’ And it is. But nobody tells you about those frustrating times, when you’re like, “I wish I was not in *niddah* right now.” There are those times also when it’s not fun, and you argue more than you would if you were allowed to touch, and it’s definitely not, like, like the most idyllic two weeks, when you’re like “Oh wow!”

(Laughs). It's like, a secret. You don't find out these things until you're married. So I always said I was gonna be open with people about it.

It is noteworthy that Gaby uses the word "secret" earlier to reflect her pleasure and empowerment in practicing the laws of *mikveh* and *niddah*, and Leah uses it to describe the shock she felt in her initiation to marriage. In a way, Gaby seizes the secrecy of these laws, which some experience as alienating, and flips it, making the secrecy her own. For Leah and Gaby the *mikveh*, the secret was not a monthly ritual, but a consciousness that remains ongoing throughout the month. These practices are constantly in motion.

There are important questions around the locus of the *mikveh* ritual: is the immersive act the heart of the ritual, or is it the waiting and counting that defines the *mikveh* experience? Like many of the rituals cited in this dissertation, the *mikveh* is not a single event but rather a frame of mind. One element of the ritual is the act of the immersive dunk. Surrounding this event, however, are a myriad of physical and emotional acts and preparations that are ongoing throughout the month. This choreography creates a mental space for women who practise *mikveh* that permits sexual consciousness, anticipation, desire, pleasure, fear, exhaustion, concern – all channelled through a ritualized action.

There seems to be a blurring of public and private in the *mikveh* practice. The laws of *niddah* are private insofar as they involve a woman managing and preparing her naked body in the privacy of her own home. Only she knows if she has counted seven-clean-days and only she knows if her *bedikah* was spotless. If she counted six days instead of seven, or her *bedikah* cloth was spotted, or she opted not to cleanse herself in the prescribed manner, no one would know. If she decided to skip a month, no one would know. The practice of these laws is not subject to social surveillance, so it is an entirely individual pursuit. The *mikveh* immersion, however, is

performed in the presence of a *mikveh* attendant, who ensures that the dunk has been performed properly and is considered kosher. Further, women converse with rabbis on the subject, as previously discussed. In that context, the laws seem far less private, as the *mikveh* attendant and rabbinic authorities are now included in a process that ostensibly pertains solely to husband and wife. The specificity of the law is what gives rise to a larger public. The instructions for *mikveh* preparation, for example, are so precise that questions invariably come up. These conversations, specifically between women, women and their husbands, and women and their rabbis, are ongoing; because the performances are monthly, the discourse, like the ritual itself, is cyclical. Every month a different set of questions is raised and answers are offered in response. A woman may also want to engage in a dialogue about her rabbi's opinion. She may have trouble with his *p'sak* (ruling) and want to discuss it.<sup>19</sup> These discourses are not discrete units of time, forming what leans toward (though does not conform to) a more traditional public based on discourse, textuality, and rationality.

Habermas speaks about “publics” as sites where conversations such as these transpire and overlap in a critical way (176). Thus, perhaps the *mikveh* be considered not only an instance of

---

<sup>19</sup> There is no real concept of a “second opinion” when asking a *niddah*-related question. Rather, the practice is that every married couple carefully selects a rabbi in the community that they trust and to whom they address all their *halachic* queries. Asking another rabbi the same question is frowned upon as it might support what has been in recent years termed “rabbi-shopping”: the practice of posing the same question to multiple rabbis for the purpose of getting a desired response. Conversely, in selecting a single rabbi, the presumption is that that rabbi knows the couple well, understands their context and family/culture of origin, and will determine *halachic* rulings accordingly. This points to larger questions around rabbinic rulings and how the Jewish legal system functions, discussion of which exceeds the limitations of this chapter. I will say that Orthodox Judaism views rabbinic law and *halacha* as fluid and adaptive, differing according to the particular socio-cultural and environmental contexts of the individual/couple/family. A classic example is the act of going to a non-kosher restaurant. Being seated at a non-kosher restaurant, even if you abstain from food or drink, is, as a rule, not permissible, as it would be considered to transgress the rule of *maarat ayin* (“what appears to the eye” – the idea that someone might see and mistake that restaurant as kosher). However, if there were particular circumstances – e.g., a person's parents were not orthodox and it would be disrespectful to decline (disrespect transgresses the larger commandment to honour one's parents) – it is possible that this act would be permissible. *Halacha* thus operates on a case-by-case basis and depends on the specific situation of a given individual.

Foucault's talking sex but also an instance of a Habermasian public insofar as it serves as a language and a space for critical inquiry and investigation. While the *mikveh* does not conform to Habermas's notion that a public is based on rational argumentation and debate, it complies with his definition in the sense that it is critical. The fact is that the *mikveh* for the orthodox is considered as serious an academy as synagogues and study halls. The *mikveh* is the women's *yeshiva*, their Talmudic discourse, their *mussar shmues* (a weekly ritual whereby men gather to carry out spiritual exercises and self-development strategies) (Heilman 243).

The laws of *niddah* and their corresponding *mikveh* rituals deeply affect the lives of orthodox Jewish women. *Mikveh* affects a woman's whole life, not just one aspect of it, and is thus *poiesis* – world-making. She performs her Jewish sexuality on a daily basis, not solely when preparing for the *mikveh*, but also when engaging with her children, husband, friends, and so forth. The laws create a general sexual consciousness for women in this community because the laws affect their daily lives so profoundly. The practical implications alone disrupt the quotidian: if she is in a *niddah* state, every time she reaches to touch her husband – even simply to pass him something – and she/he resists is marked with *niddah*, with sexuality. This creates a charged spiritual reality within orthodox Jewish communities, a concealed yet communal sexual subtext that pulses through the *mikveh* public.

The tension of this intimate-yet-public setting seems to produce a strong sexual consciousness among orthodox Jewish women. The women presented in this ethnography who practise the laws of *Taharat HaMishpacha* demonstrate to me mindfulness and criticality as well as high levels of sexual consciousness, which include strong sexual desire and a longing for intimacy, a heightened awareness of the body, a willingness to confront issues pertaining to sexuality, and an openness to discussing sexual experience and expression. In short, while some

may view the rituals of orthodox Jewish women as inherently conservative (or even repressive), these are not the voices of subjugated women. They are the voices of women who negotiate their sexuality from within a system as opposed to by positioning themselves as standing against it.

The *mikveh* immersion is just one event in a larger group of discursive practices that orthodox women utilize to strive toward an abstract ideal – whether it be sanctity in marriage, purity in relational intentions, sacred sex, or a thousand other things. The laws of *Taharat HaMishpacha* stand in for an abstract Jewish concept of sex in orthodox Jewish communities, and the process of enacting of these laws, while regulated by men, conceives a sexuality that is, paradoxically, strictly for women.

The opportunity that *mikveh* laws establish for women to reflect on and be critical about what they just did and how it affects them is incredibly valuable. The fact that the very structure of these laws presuppose criticality is an interesting one and arguably a gendered one. As the chapters that follow this one will suggest (and I use that word genuinely – merely a suggestion, a complete exploration of which would require an additional dissertation project), orthodox law for men does not necessarily offer the same opportunity for reflection or criticality. Deliberation and attention, yes; but not reflection. I hope that future iterations of this research will address this question of gender distinction more extensively.

## Chapter Three: Passover Objects: How to Be/Have Them

The Pesach *Seder*, defined as the Passover “order” or “arrangement,” is a ritual feast that tells an Exodus story marking the beginning of the Passover holiday. The *Seder* follows a structure outlined in a scripture called the *Hagaddah*, which narrates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. *Seder* customs include telling the story, discussing the story, drinking four cups of wine, partaking of symbolic foods placed on the Passover *Seder* plate, reclining in celebration of freedom, and finally, eating matzah, unleavened bread. It is the latter ritual, the eating of matzah, around which this chapter revolves. The matzah-eating is the event – a performance practice representing a theme of freedom that anchors the Passover holiday – and what swirls around and between and through this event is an elaborate choreography that the present chapter aims to deconstruct.

Because this movement includes not only human bodies but objects, I spend the first section of the chapter paying attention to the performativity of objects, and then I build an argument around the matzah object and how it embodies Jewish women at the *Seder*. Supporting this claim is an in-depth analysis of *chametz* ritual, an intricate search for traces of bread that is a preoccupation of the Passover holiday. Like the *mikveh* discussed in the previous chapter, *chametz* ritual has a loose structure, with no fixed beginning, middle, or end. It is an elaborate, untidy choreography that contextualizes the matzah event. As was the case with *mikveh*, a performance analysis of this choreography can serve a larger argument about failure: that this choreography is impossible, and necessarily so. I argue that *chametz* law can never be performed exactly and that it is precisely this misalignment – the discrepancy between the theory and practice, between striving and failing, between letter and spirit – that creates and, indeed, defines Jewish communities and cultures. As with *mikveh* performance, it is at the juncture where

individuals engage in the process of searching and checking that meanings are inscribed onto objects and individuality is expressed.

### Performing Objects: An Overview

I begin with a discussion of material objects. In *Destination Culture*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett posits that material objects do not possess inherent meaning; rather, they become meaningful when they are contextualized. Their meanings are defined by the worldviews of their carriers (2). She writes, “They are what they are by virtue of the disciplines that ““know them”” (2). Reorienting this statement slightly, one could say that an object acquires its purpose when it is carried away and contextualized, like cells differentiating in a body. In this movement of becoming, objects turn into artifacts. Indeed, objects “are exhibits of those who make them” (2). The present chapter poses the question, How does matzah learn its Jewishness? How can we understand its origin story, its process of becoming, by analyzing its cosmic twin, *chametz*? What can performance studies learn methodologically from the productively complicated process of reaching and failing that *chametz* ritual sets forth?

Before addressing these questions, we must ask, How do objects do? Robin Bernstein offers some answers in *Racial Innocence*, whereby she distinguishes between “things” and “objects.” She posits that things assert themselves and are performative. A thing “demands that people confront it on its own terms; a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material in relation to the thing” (73). Things affect the social worlds in which they are situated and cause these worlds to change. Things, but not objects, script behaviors. According to Bernstein, Martin Heidegger and more recent scholars of “thing theory” define an *object* as a chunk of matter that one looks through or beyond to understand something human. A *thing*, in contrast, asserts itself within a field of matter (72; emphasis in original). An object helps us

understand what *is*. Heidegger, Bernstein says, states that an object is a microcosm of a lifeworld and can offer insight into the human condition. In Austinian terms, objects are constative, as they reflect or describe reality, and things are “performative,” as they *produce* reality (Bernstein 74). Bernstein states, “things are performatives in that they *do* something: they invite humans to move” (74). Bernstein offers an illustrative example of how a knife can be both an object and a thing depending on the subject who possesses it:

When an amateur cook uses a knife to chop an onion, the knife might function as an object that the amateur barely notices; in this scenario, the knife is only a tool used to obtain the chopped onion that the human desires. For a trained chef, however, a knife can never be an object for such a person: each edge of a knife glitters individually with potential and stubbornness, with past, present, and future motions of slicing and chopping. The trained chef’s knife is therefore a thing with which a chef negotiates, while an amateur’s knife is an object to an extent that it is only a means to an end. (74)

The negotiation Bernstein describes here suggests that the trained chef treats the knife as a subject in its own right, independent of the chef. In an almost Buberian vein, the trained chef engages in an “I–Thou” relationship with the knife, while the amateur remains in the realm of “I–it” (*I and Thou* 1). There is a way, however, for the object to assert itself and become a thing. She explains, “If the amateur’s knife should slip and cut a finger, however, that knife has suddenly become a thing that has leaped up and asserted itself, a thing that demands to be reckoned with. The difference between objects and things, then, is not essential but situational and objective” (Bernstein 74).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett takes this analysis a step further when she poses the question, How do museum exhibits and displays at festivals and world fairs not only assert themselves but

actually exhibit *agency*? What does it mean to show? She argues that fragments *become* ethnographic objects by virtue of their detachment (*Destination Culture* 2). This becoming is, in a sense, a process of materialization. Butler helps us understand how physical bodies materialize as men and women from the time of infancy, “In that naming,” Butler writes, “the girl is girl-ed, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender (Butler 7). Just as the physical body learns sex and gender through a process of materialization, so, too, can objects establish significance through a similar rehearsal process; an object becomes itself through the disciplines with which it engages. In this process of becoming, objects turn into things, to use Heidegger’s terms.

Thus, in order to understand matzah, a central site of the Passover display, we must first examine the object-relation story in which it is situated. What can we see about the lifeworld that surrounds this object and how, in turn, does this life world “know” the object?

### Performing *Chametz*: Searching and Purging

There is a strong culture of vigilance and scrupulousness amongst orthodox Jewish women, as they are instructed to perform discursive acts of “checking” from a young age. Orthodox Jewish girls are taught to be meticulous with *kashrut* (dietary laws related to food consumption and preparation), modesty (including dress, speech, and behaviour), and especially *mikveh* ritual and the laws of *niddah* discussed in the previous chapter. The laws relating to the preparation of matzah are another instance of the detail-oriented consciousness that pervades orthodox communities of women. As meticulous as the laws of *kashrut* and *mikveh* are the rituals of preparing the home for the holiday of Passover, including but not limited to the expulsion of *chametz* from the home. Jewish women are the stage managers for this event, scrupulously smoothing every crevice of the home with a fine-tooth-comb. This is the larger framework we

must consider when analyzing the matzah: the prohibitions against baking, displaying, and consuming leavened bread and the particular choreographies around removing it from the home.

*Chametz* is defined as “leaven” – any food that contains grain and water that have been fermented “to enable it to “rise.” Bread, pizza, and beer are blatant examples of *chametz*, but any food that contains grain or grain derivatives can be, and often is, considered *chametz* – for example, cereal, cake, cookies, pasta. Practically speaking, any processed food that is not certified as “Kosher for Passover” may potentially include *chametz* ingredients. The Gemara dictates, in tractate *Pesachim* chapters one to four, that before the commencement of Passover, all *chametz* must be removed from the home. The laws pertaining to the elimination of *chametz* are so stringent that they require new dishes, utensils, and even cleaning products. In *The Book of Our Heritage*, Eliyahu Kitov describes *chametz*:

The difference between *chametz* and matzah is minute; we use the same flour, the same water, and the same oven for both of them. How then do they become so vastly different? Only by a person’s doing nothing does this dough become *chametz* – it ferments, its volume increases, its form changes, and its taste is soured. These changes all come about on their own and require no effort on the part of [hu]man. But in order for this dough to become matzah which is suitable for fulfilling an important mitzvah [commandment], one has to work hard, to take pains, and to make an effort. (538)

The first thing we learn about *chametz*, then, is that passivity forms it. By doing nothing, matzah, a holy object, turns to *chametz*, an unholy object. Action, performance, is what defines matzah as matzah; it becomes holy by a matter of time. The tradition of women spending time on religious commandments, taking action and care to fulfil ritual law in its totality, is key to a particular performance trajectory.

With the same meticulousness that women practise when preparing their bodies for the *mikveh*, women cleanse their homes of *chametz* months before the festival begins. Ensuring that all *chametz* is disposed of from the home is of grave importance, and because women are traditionally responsible for domestic matters, the task is theirs. In his *Passover Digest*, Avrohom Blumenkrantz remarks that “it is the woman who generally shoulders the responsibility of preparing the house for Pesach ... because women are more sensitive to cleanliness and what it is all about and because they are more scrupulous in their approach to Yom Tov [festival] preparations” (Blumenkrantz 27). Blumenkrantz’s understanding that women being “more sensitive to cleanliness,” I believe, refers to the laws of *niddah*. The culture of orthodoxy in Toronto – and other cities, I imagine – seems to condition women to be exquisitely nuanced in their examinations of both the body and the home. Hence, women are traditionally the stage managers for this event.

In my analysis of the woman’s responsibility for cleansing the home of *chametz*, I believe it is worth noting that rabbinic law states that the *removal of chametz* trumps other aspects of Passover law, including *Seder* ritual. Kitov writes,

The laws of Pesach are more stringent than those of other Festivals ... Even if a person fulfilled all other requirements of Pesach – if they offered the Pesach sacrifice on the fourteenth of Nisan; if they ate it together with matzos and bitter herbs; if they retold the story of the Exodus from Egypt and praised God and thanked Him; if they carefully refrained from eating *chametz* for all seven days of the Festival; if they did no work on both the first and the seventh days of the Festival – but failed to remove *chametz* before Pesach and retained it in his possession, they will have committed many transgressions and his punishment is most serious. (513; italics in original)

In the holiday manual *Hilchot Chagim*, Mordechai Eliyahu makes a similar claim, but from a positive perspective, citing the legend of the Ari'zal, a rabbi and Jewish mystic in the community of Safed in the sixteenth century.

Every person should be careful to clean the entire house, so that absolutely no *chametz* at all remains in his possession. It is well-known that the students of our Rabbi the Ari'zal (may his merit protect us) said that someone who is wary of even the tiniest bit of *chametz* on Pesach is assured that he won't sin throughout the year. (54)

It seems that the *removal of chametz*, more so than its consumption, is what the law is concerned with. This suggests that the purging process is of spiritual import and is thus germane to the essence of the holiday. The performative aspects of the law – that is, the acts of searching for and disposing of *chametz* – are important objects of analysis and may even be the truest demonstration of the law's efficacy. So important is the act of checking that the rabbinic legislature composed a mimesis ritual that choreographs a particular searching and finding routine. Eliyahu's manual explicates this kind of 'dance' when he describes a custom called *Bedikat Chametz*:

According to the Ari'zal, it is good that the wife or a family member take ten pieces of bread, each less than the weight of an olive, and wrap each piece individually in a piece of paper or bag (so that they won't fall apart and leave *chametz* in the house) and hide them in the house before the search. It's worthwhile to write a list of where they're hiding the *chametz*, so as not to forget. (56)

He goes on to explain that it is not enough to merely search for these pieces of bread; the object is to use these pieces as a demonstration for the real search for *chametz*. This metatheatrical

display/disappearance of bread is another example of the effigy approach in action – a stand-in for the loss of an original in production of a meaning-making experience.

Kitov elaborates on the performative dimension of *chametz* ritual:

The Torah states: *You shall not see* (*Shemos* 13:7) and *You shall not have in your possession* (*ibid.* 12:19). These precepts are in addition to the prohibition of eating *chametz* on Pesach. Thus the Torah gives us two negative precepts in this matter, as well as one positive precept: *But by the first day [of the Festival] all chametz shall have been removed from your home* (*ibid.* 12:15). ( 514; emphasis in original)

The context of this passage requires an understanding of the Jewish legal structure. In Jewish legislation, positive commandments are considered doings and negative commandments are considered not-doings. In this case, *You shall not see* is a negative commandment, a not-doing, and *You shall remove* is a positive commandment, a doing. Positive commandments are performative, and negative commandments are actions to refrain from. There is something powerful about the not doing in this context: not seeing and not consuming. Sarah Ahmed speaks about non-performativity in her essay “Declarations of Whiteness,” which posits that utterances do not always produce reality and performatives are not always “happy,” to use Austin’s term. She draws attention to how invested we are in “saying as if saying was doing,” and that this can actually be a problem; we take for granted that saying is necessarily doing (Ahmed). It seems equally important for performance scholars to attend to moments of non-performativity as to moments of performativity.

It is interesting that these laws are broken down into parts; once again, we see that there is something about the act of checking, searching, and removing *chametz* that is significant – the purging process – as distinct from the laws forbidding consumption.

Hence, by midday of the fourteenth of Nisan, every Jew is obligated to remove all the *chametz* from his home as well as *chametz* which he owns but is located elsewhere. If he fails to do so, he has transgressed the positive precept. If he does not do so from midday on the fourteenth of Nisan until the end of Pesach – i.e. if the *chametz* remains in his home or in his possession during Pesach – at every moment during this period, he is guilty of transgressing the positive precept as well as the two negative precepts. (Kitov 514)

This passage emphasizes the severity of the commandment, particularly by quantifying the thousands of accumulated moments of transgression in a case where *chametz* is not removed. Additionally, a question arises from this formulation: Why must the individual remove all *chametz* which he owns but is located elsewhere? This is further evidence that removing *chametz*, rather than abstaining from eating it, is the crux, as the threat of consumption is significantly decreased if the *chametz* is not physically present. Kitov is suggesting here that there is more to *chametz* than physicality; *chametz* as a tangible object reflects a deeper concept of *chametz*, an ephemeral *chametz*, which must be removed. He states,

To what does the Torah refer when it speaks of removing *chametz*? The reference is to nullifying it in one's mind – to considering it as dust, and as being no longer in his possession. One must consciously consider all of the *chametz* that is in one's possession as if it were as useless and as worthless as dust. (Kitov 515)

Kitov's understanding of *chametz* as a concept that must be removed from one's mind echoes the understanding in an interview I conducted with Leah, where she stated, "The whole day before you go to the *mikveh*, in your head you're mentally preparing" (see p.99 of this dissertation). For

Leah, the *mikveh* is not only a monthly ritual but also a state of mind and a level of consciousness. The removal of *chametz* is similarly a matter of consciousness.

In the following section Kitov poses a fruitful question:

The Sages explained that the verse which states: “All *chametz* shall not be seen by you” means that one is forbidden to see *chametz* which belongs to him. The prohibition does not apply to *chametz* which is either ownerless or belongs to someone else. If this is the case, why then is it necessary to conduct such a thorough search for *chametz*? Why not simply render it ownerless by nullifying it? (515)

Drawing attention once again to the performative aspect of the law – the disposal of *chametz* – Kitov makes a good point: Why go through the trouble of physically removing *chametz* when one can so easily remove it from one’s thoughts? His answer to this question is the problem of intentionality.

In short, it isn’t enough to remove *chametz* from your home; you have to remove it from your thoughts as well. The *chametz* of the mind is equally important to address, it seems.

Blumenkrantz states that simply declaring *chametz* “disowned” is not sufficient; the individual must “search for it in every place it could possibly be found, take it out of our possession and burn it” (26). He explains the reasoning behind this:

When a person decides to nullify and disown the *chametz*, he must do so wholeheartedly and with a clear mind. Many people would not be capable of doing this at a time when *chametz* is still permitted. In addition, someone may have a large inventory of *chametz* (e.g. a liquor store) and we may not be sure how wholeheartedly he may have disowned and made his *chametz* free for all. (26–27)

Blumenkrantz is acknowledging the subjectivity of “wholeheartedness” in this passage, being real about the fact that those largely invested in *chametz* might possibly deflect the oath of nullification during the *chametz* process. Which is why, he asserts, Jews are required to physically remove all *chametz* from their homes, property, and premises under their jurisdiction (i.e. desk, office, locker, and car), even if they will not be on those premises during Pesach (27). Eliyahu uses similar terminology in the chapter entitled “Search for *Chametz*,” stating that “immediately after the search one should annul the *chametz*. The main annulment is in one’s heart” (62). Kitov echoes this sentiment when he speaks about “sincerity and intent” during the nullifying formula:

There are two reasons why we are so thorough in searching for *chametz*. The act of nullifying *chametz* and declaring it ownerless depends upon a person’s thoughts. It is only efficacious if one does so with complete sincerity and intent. Since people do not all think the same way, some may treat the matter more lightly and not renounce their ownership of the *chametz* with complete intent. The Sages therefore decreed that the nullification of one’s *chametz* must be preceded by complete removal, accomplished by searching for it thoroughly in the house. In this way, the person shows that he sincerely intends to render his *chametz* ownerless. (515–16)

These passages demonstrate how performance brings together the letter of the law and the spirit of the law through intentionality and subjectivity. We see that the written text – in this case, the laws pertaining to *chametz* removal – is not sufficient; one must have “sincerity and intent.” Kitov also explains, however, that “complete sincerity and intent” is impossible, which is why the *activity* is so important. The ritual does not necessarily reconcile the letter and the spirit; however, it does encapsulate the tension and the paradox in a way that allows for subjectivity

to emerge. Let us remember Butler's premise about performance here: the "I" emerges *in the midst* of a complicated dynamics (Introduction xvi). Individual idiosyncrasy makes it impossible to match the picture perfectly (text vs. performance).

Kitov's formulation is interesting to me because it suggests that subjectivity gets in the way of performing the ideal *chametz* nullification, which is the removal of *chametz* from one's thoughts, whether that be literal (thinking about eating bread on Pesach) or figurative (having negative thoughts, thinking *leshon harah* [evil speech] about others, and/or any other unwanted *shmutz* in one's mind) over the holy Passover festival. Or does it? Perhaps the very *impossibility* of total removal, which includes a psychic dimension, like completely cleansing one's mind of negativity, is precisely the point. That the performance of the law is a systematic encore to an impossibly abstract ideal. Maybe we aren't supposed to match the picture perfectly. Maybe that's a false set-up and the picture is necessarily unmatchable. Maybe the performance of the law is a stand-in for an ideal that cannot exist and possibly never existed, and it is the *conscious process of trying* that is the point.

To further this idea, I return to Butler's the concept of materialization. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that human beings *can never* successfully "materialize" because subjectivity gets in the way:

Materialization is never quite complete, ... bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that regulatory law. (2)

In a Butlerian vein, I am arguing that it is the body's inability to comply fully with the law – in this case, the law to completely remove *chametz* from not only one's home but also one's mind and heart – that is the essence of the holiday. The lag between doing and the feeling is what renders the *halacha* personal. This is the dance: the striving toward and the falling short. The literal messiness of tearing one's house apart in search for *chametz* and the inevitable impossibility of reaching total perfection reflect the figurative messiness of the *chametz* display and render the whole ordeal a *halachic* ideal. The fact that the mechanics of the process are imperfect defines its *halachic* efficacy.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan argues that the ontology of performance is disappearance (143). If this is true, then the ontology of Passover performance is disposal: to search for and remove *chametz* from the home. The void of *chametz* creates a sort of empty space that is performative; it carries out the Passover ritual by virtue of having been emptied.

Kitov outlines in great detail the methodology for the search for *chametz* both in and outside of the home. Laws pertaining not only to the search for *chametz* but also to the multiple variables determining the conditions for the search are described at length. Even the state of being of the individual searching is prescribed. In an almost Stanislavskian fashion, the performer of this ritual is instructed to prepare himself for this work using particular practices:

From half an hour before the stars appear ... one should be careful not to begin any work, nor should one eat, until after he has searched for *chametz*. Even if one usually engages in Torah study at this time, he should postpone it until after the search. (517)

Much like a theatrical performance, the *chametz* performance is choreographed to a tee. All production elements, including lighting, set, and props, work together to stage the work.

If one did not search for *chametz* on the eve of the fourteenth, he should do so during the day itself – by candlelight rather than by daylight. If the natural light is very strong – for example, in a hall which is completely open on one side – one may conduct the search by daylight. This is also true of rooms and houses which have many windows and much light. The area near the windows may be checked by using daylight – provided that the windows are open. (518)

When examining the laws relating to the tangible removal of *chametz*, it is the *searching* more so than the *finding* of *chametz* that is emphasized. Kitov states, “The obligation is to search for *chametz*, not to find it” (523). The checking rituals involved in this process are detailed, indeed, much like the checking rituals involved in *mikveh* practice. To this end, Blumenkrantz’s manual includes a comprehensive list of cleaning practices suggested for a woman to include in her search for *chametz*, including how to dispose of chewing gum, how to clean a blender, hat, thermos or kettle, stove, cabinets and appliances, pots and pans, a microwave, a barbeque, and how to remove oil and grease. “For impossible to clean places,” he concludes, “bleach and other strong solutions can be used to render the *chametz* unfit to eat” (29–30). Blumenkrantz’s digest is comprised of thirty-eight chapters, including “Preparing for Pesach,” “Kashering for Pesach,” “The Week Before Pesach,” “Special Diets on Pesach,” “The Last Days of Pesach,” and more, and it is five-hundred-and-forty-two pages long. Kitov elaborates on the *chametz* movement even further:

Any place into which there is a possibility that *chametz* was brought must be searched.

This includes rooms in which one *normally* does not bring food, for it is possible that *chametz* was brought into the room unintentionally. This, all the rooms of the house –

even an attic – must be searched, for it is not unlikely that one entered a room with food in his hand. (522)

The hyper-performative cleaning practices in the search for and elimination of *chametz*, including searching the attic, whose probability of containing *chametz* is almost zero, comprise a complex choreography, indeed – a dance designed to both complicate and make meaning of the Passover event.

#### Performing Expulsion: Women and Checking

When I interviewed women about their experiences cleaning their homes for Passover, many of them, too, privileged the searching over the finding. I have selected material from only two interviews because they showed two different methods of Passover preparation while sharing thematic similarities including deliberation, consciousness, precision and piety in their searches for *chametz*. Shaindy and Nechama (pseudonyms) are women between the ages of 20-39, married, have children, live in Toronto, and identify as orthodox. They both express pleasure in their personalized methods for cleaning their homes, a task considered in their households to be a woman's domain. They each emphasized the importance of cleaning areas of the home that do not typically contain *chametz*.

#### Shaindy

Shaindy is thirty-six years of age, lives in Toronto, and is a mother of three at the time of this interview. She works as a teacher of Torah subjects at a local high school for girls. Shaindy was raised modern orthodox, attending elementary and high school affiliated with Bnei Akiva (a religious Zionist Youth organization), and transitioned to a Chassidic lifestyle with her husband after getting married. She and her husband are members of a small Chassidic synagogue in their

neighborhood. She invites me into her home in midtown Toronto around Sheppard Avenue. Over the course of our two-hour conversation, Shaindy shares with me a method for Pesach cleaning that she has honed over the years:

I make a master list on Rosh Chodesh Adar [the first of the Hebrew month of Adar] ... I make a really crazy, in depth, itemized list of things that need to be done. It sort of looks like a chart where I have, like, a list of places and then what needs to be done. So the downward columns are, like,

“bedroom”

“closet”

“kids’ bedrooms”

“living room,”

etc. – the places. And then the second column is what needs to be done: “organizing”

“dusting”

“washing”

“vacuuming”

and then the actual “checking for *chametz*.”

And within each category, I break it down. So, let’s say I have “girls bedroom,” so I’ll have a lot of things:

“closets”

“drawers”

“beds”

“windowsills”

“shelves” ...

I'm just a list-person, so for me it just helps. I literally have everything itemized, and as I do it I make a check.

“Shelves: organized, check. Wiped down and dusted, check. *Chametz*-search, check.”

That way it's just really itemized and organized. I start so early with the list, because I work and I'm with the kids, and let's say I do one thing per week or whatever, I'm just slowly making progress. (Shaindy, Interview, February 2013)

It's very hard for women who work full time to find the time to clean and search for *chametz*, which is why Shaindy starts so far in advance. She applies the same methodical approach to her Pesach cleaning as she does in the classroom; she is deliberate, meticulous, and organized. By itemizing her process she is able to manage the anxieties that often come with Passover cleaning. When asked about her specific cleaning practices, Shaindy describes the rigour with which she cleans her home, even in areas that you would not expect to contain *chametz*:

Obviously, I leave my kitchen for last. I start from the outside and work my way in. I'll begin with the guestroom and then my closet and then my husband's closet ... I know, you're thinking, “K, why would you check your closet?” But you can trust me, my kids will bring food anywhere and everywhere. Once I remember thinking, “should I even check Chaim [her husband]'s shelves, they're so high up, I'll never find anything there...” I found, like, a pile of croutons. Croutons, from soup! How did the kids even get them there? I have no clue. But you know what I'm saying? You never know.

This shows Kitov's principle in action: even places like the attic, which would not typically contain *chametz*, need to be checked. In Shaindy's case, this principle is especially

fruitful, since there is, indeed, *chametz* hiding in the closet; but even if *chametz* had not been not found in these odd spaces, it is appropriate that they be checked for the simple reason that in Jewish culture the searching is an end in and of itself.

Shaindy continues describing her method:

The kitchen is the last thing I do, and even there I start from the outside and work my way in. I start by doing the walls and the baseboards away from my cooking area. Then, my desk in my kitchen. Then I do the arts and crafts area. Then I designate one or two cupboards for Pesach so that I can shop for the holiday, I can start filling up those shelves. I keep them taped up or locked so the kids can't access them.

Shaindy clarifies that the items intended for use on Passover should be separated from the everyday items that could contain *chametz*. This is why she designates an area for her Pesach prep, out of reach from her children. "At this point," she says, with intensity in her eyes, "I get hardcore." She elaborates:

Each day I'll choose one quadrant and I'll do the wall and the baseboards. And I'm doing and I'm spraying and the scraping with a toothpick ... like, there's crust everywhere. I'll spritz it with my cleaner and get all the *shmutz* out and the crud. Again, working outside in so that the last thing I do are the stoves, fridges, sinks, and oven.

Though she does not say it, I believe that Shaindy takes pride in her annual, three-month ritual of meticulous cleaning—*Rosh Chodesh Adar* (usually February) until Pesach (usually April). When Shaindy says, "and I'm *doing* and I'm *spraying*...", I realize that, like the *mikveh*, women are commanded to *do* for this mitzvah. It seems to me that Shaindy takes pleasure in her ability to perform the expulsion of *chametz* and prepare her home for Passover, as one would prepare their body for the *mikveh*.

Nechama

Nechama is thirty-three years old, lives in Toronto, and, like Shaindy, is a mother of three at the time of this interview. At the time, she worked as a researcher and lived in a neighborhood around Lawrence and Marlee Avenue. Nechama was raised in a “conservadox” home (a cross between conservative and orthodox) and became more religious in her twenties. She attended a Hebrew Day School that identifies as religiously Conservative for elementary school and for high school, the same modern orthodox Bnei Akiva school as Shaindy. She and her husband are connected to a community that she considers ‘Modern-*Yeshivish*.’

Nechama invites me to her three-bedroom apartment and, over the course of our two-hour conversation, describes a version of Passover cleaning that parallels Shaindy’s in some ways and differs in others. Nechama also begins her cleaning in advance, starting with the least saturated *chametz* areas, but not as early as Shaindy. Nechama states,

I usually begin a few weeks before. I start by cleaning the rooms that generally don’t have food in them. Bedrooms, washrooms, things like that. Taking things away from the walls, vacuuming, etc. And then as I get closer to Pesach, I make sure that no new *chametz* has entered any of the rooms and that nothing is in the couch or behind corners.

(Nechama, Interview, March 2013)

While less elaborate, Nechama’s process is equally technical. With a self-diagnosed “tendency toward O.C.D. (obsessive-compulsive disorder),” she explains that she is careful to rein herself in with the cleaning, since her nature is to get bogged down by technicalities. She explains that the detail-oriented framework of Jewish law can be an (in)convenient match with O.C.D. (orthodox people who suffer from O.C.D. will sometimes use *halacha* as a vehicle for their illness) and it is important distinguish between piety and obsession.

I do feel nervous during this time. Partly because I'm a bit O.C.D. in general ... But I think if you do as good a job as you possibly can, and you don't have an attitude that you can't do it, then that's it. You know that you did your best. The hardwood floors get mopped, the carpets get vacuumed, etc. Dust is not considered *chametz*, so while I do try to dust and make sure that my shelves are clean, just a wipe down with spray will generally suffice. I do what I would normally do in terms of cleaning, just more deliberate. You're specifically looking for crumbs and trying to look in crevices and things like that.

Nechama refers to the performance of *Bedikat Chametz* (see p.138 of this dissertation) in her description of Pesach cleaning. Like the *bedikahs* discussed at length in chapter two, this, too, is a kind of check. The definition of *bedikah* is "check," and it is a generic Hebrew umbrella term for checks of all kinds. The *bedikahs* that women perform for the *mikveh* are ritualized vaginal checks; this, on the other hand, is a ritualized *chametz* check. What is involved in this *bedikah*? Nechama explains:

The process of searching for the *chametz* is a deliberate act of putting actual pieces of bread in various spaces in the house and "searching" for it, with the purpose of retrieving those pieces. In the process, if there are any other places that you maybe forgot or ... you happen to find *chametz* on route to the deliberately placed pieces, it's an opportunity to search and find.

She explains that this practice forces the searcher to look again in places one might think are obvious. The embodied practice of "pretend searching" prompts a process of consciousness, of "re-looking," fostering an immensely thorough search to commence the holiday. "It's not enough just to gather up the ten pieces, Blumenkratz explains,

one must search the entire house for *chametz*. Someone who just gathered these pieces of bread and didn't check all of the holes and cracks in the house didn't fulfill the mitzvah of the search, and his blessing on the search is virtually in vain. (Blumenkrantz 56)

Reflecting on both Blumenkrantz and Kitov's emphases on searching and not finding, we can ascertain that it is the concept not the substance of *chametz* that is at play. Spaces like the attic are checked though they are unlikely to contain actual *chametz*; the possibility of it, though – the fact that it could exist and thus occupies a kind of spiritual space – means that a search is required. This kind of ghosting appears not only in the attics of Jewish homes but also in the minds of Jewish individuals. The possibility of *chametz* in the home, the threat of its appearance during Passover, permeates the thoughts of Jews over the course of the festival and, I believe, is embedded in the philosophy of the holiday. There is a certain hyper-anxiety that precipitates the atmosphere of Passover from the start. Nechama comments on this anxiety when referencing her O.C.D. tendencies. Her reflections are framed by an underlying assumption that there are severe anxieties around the *chametz* search, severe anxieties illustrated by her efforts to curb them. Thankfully, she explains, there is a nullifying prayer that is said once the search is complete, in case traces of *chametz* still remain in the home. This prayer is a safety net. Nechama states,

I do feel nervous ... But you know that you've done your best. And in the event that you still have [*chametz*], it's OK because you've nullified ... You're covered. I think that takes some of the anxiety away of not having done a perfect job.

Indeed, a perfect job would be impossible. And yet, the kinetic energy that derives from this impossibility is very important. The ghost of *chametz* emerges from the depths of Passover laws and manuals and produces a spirit of Pesach that is, at once, uniquely personal and uniquely Jewish.

Nechama describes a moment of panic she once experienced on the eve of Passover, upon finding *chametz* after it all had been eliminated. “I found it in the bottom of my stroller once,” she shared, her pupils dilating. “On *Erev Pesach* [Passover eve], after we nullified everything. It was in my diaper bag.” When I inquired if that was a regular occurrence, she set the record straight:

No, generally speaking, I don’t find [after Passover has begun]. But I also don’t go looking to find. If I forgot to check a pocket or a jacket, I prefer not to wear the jacket or go near the jacket in the event that I were to find. Even if I have a certain amount of certainty that there is nothing there. It’s just not a good idea.

This, to me, is yet another recognition (and demonstration) of participating in a system with an impossible ideal. The principle of “just don’t look,” is one that the orthodox Jewish system supports – and not in an ad hoc manner. Jewish law accounts for imperfect practice so perfectly that it contains a built-in failsafe:

The Torah is more stringent about *chametz* than about other forbidden foods: we are obligated to remove it from our possession; we are warned not to see it or have it; and we are forbidden to derive any benefit from it ... Even a minute particle of *chametz* is forbidden on Pesach. Even if the amount of *chametz* in a mixture is only 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of the total, the entire mixture is forbidden as *chametz*! ... Pots, dishes, and other utensils which were used all year round may not be used on Pesach because of the *chametz* which they have absorbed. (Kitov 529–31)

Matzah: *Chametz’s* Double

The ghost of *chametz* is so essential to the ontology of Passover that its signature food, matzah, is its double. The identity of matzah is inexplicably tied to the shadow of *chametz* and is made

holy by that relation. The significance of matzah rests in large part on its not being *chametz*. This is made evident by the manner in which it is baked and prepared. Kitov describes how matzah is “guarded” in production:

How do we “guard” the matzah used on Pesach? From the time that the wheat is taken to the mill to be ground into flour, it is kept under careful supervision to make sure that it does not come into contact with water or other moisture ... All the utensils and machinery used for preparing the *matzos* – starting from the sifters used on the flour – must be clean and smoothed every hour ... The wheat is not baked on the same day on which it was ground, for it is still warm from the processing and would therefore ferment – and become *chametz* – more rapidly. It is watched while it is being kneaded to ensure that this is not done near an oven or open window which is exposed to the sun, lest the dough become hot and ferment quickly. (532–33)

So fine and so delicate is the balance between *chametz* and matzah, it’s almost poetic: the human hand washes and smooths and the human mind keeps an eye on operations. Once again, we see the value of subjectivity to this ritual. The efforts to segregate two objects so inextricably linked are painstaking.

The idea of objects as ghosts is explored in Alice Rayner’s *Ghosts*. In this book, Rayner relies on phenomenology to read stage objects. She theorizes the object by drawing out a tension between its material form and its representational function (74). She states,

An object may ... become larger than itself as it expands toward multiple associations and meanings, or it may contract toward mute materiality that refutes and escapes the habits of making meaning. In other words, stage props clearly participate in the

signifying, narrative, and stylistic fictions of the drama as well as the culture, and they also supply the material, aesthetic, and tangible reality of things in themselves. (74)

Rayner describes the elasticity of objects as they move in and out of their materiality. Objects participate in an aesthetic system and expand beyond it through signification. Theatrically, objects are part of a set; phenomenologically, they are part of a matrix of signifiers. Rayner points out the multiple ways in which objects expand and contract: “Objects, particularly in the form of possessions, are extensions of an individual self and the body: they define, enlarge, and extend individual corporeality beyond the limits of the body” (79).

She comments further on the performativity of objects by elaborating on their expansive/contractive faculties. Beginning with the former, she posits that objects facilitate immersion in the world. From the time of infancy, human beings possess and manipulate objects in order to find and understand themselves in the world. This process is identity-forming as it immerses the individual in the world while simultaneously differentiating him or her from it.

The “object relations” of infancy, of course, enable both connection and autonomy.

Through somatic, sensory bonding, an infant becomes part of the world and gradually learns to feel itself feeling and recognize its dependence on the object as well as its independence. In that process it learns to differentiate itself from the other. The story of object relations is fundamental here because it imagines the first appearance of an object and a primary rift in the constitution of a subject, in the establishment of difference between self and other. (80)

And she refers to the duality of objects as a “paradox of intimacy and exclusion” (79) – intimate because they engage the human spirit with the material world and exclusive because they draw attention to the difference between the two. In a case where an object is lost, Rayner explains, the

intimate/exclusive dimensions of the object are in constant flux. An infant will experience this loss through a phantom effect, which, in turn, constitutes his or her subject position:

In its preverbal and precognitive state, the infant cannot fully distinguish between the lost object and the affective and sensory experience of its loss, which is how and why objects have to be understood in both their material reality and their phantasmic, psychic force.

In the “throwing out” of the material other, the subject as the other is formed. (80)

This formulation rests on the Butlerian premise that the subject does not exist before language; rather, it immerses from within a complex system of language, gesture and discursive practices. There is no “I” a priori. In the midst of this messiness – in the case of the infant, *between* lost and found, the material and the psychic, the letter and the spirit – is precisely where identity forms. The infant learns who he or she is in the process of belonging.

Rayner’s theory offers an interesting framework in which to situate *chametz* and matzah. Borrowing her words, I suggest that not only do the matzah and *chametz* object “expand” and/or “contract” (dough is considered *matzah* if it avoids the process of expansion, rendering it *chametz*) but that it is in the “throwing out” of *chametz* “that the subject as the other is formed.” Orthodox Jewish women, though not responsible for the ceremonial “throwing away” of *chametz*, are typically responsible for the purging of *chametz* from the home, as they are in charge of kitchen affairs. For this reason, their “affective and sensory experience of its loss” is more profound, as they actually performed the practices involved in its removal. Thus the phantom effect, the ghost of *chametz*, is gendered; women *are* the matzah in the Passover ritual. They are displayed at the *Seder* as physical embodiments of the ghost of *chametz*. In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s terms, the representations in this particular Jewish display (the Passover

*Seder*) are constitutive: they (fore)shadow the Jewish women in the form/anti-form of the matzah object.

In her essay, “Girls in ‘White’ Dresses, Pretend Fathers,” Heather Davis-Fisch speaks about the role of ghosting and how fundamental it is to the phenomenological structure of theatre. She writes,

Theatre allows for a present object to substitute for a missing object but always preserves, and makes visible, the gap between the two ... [E]xamining [performance] ... requires attention to the processes of substitution and surrogation and to the ghostly figure of the effigy: this allows one to locate these performances as fundamentally theatrical (5).

Following Davis-Fisch’s logic, the Passover ritual is fundamentally theatrical, as it substitutes matzah, the present object, for *chametz*, the missing object, while ever preserving the gap between the two. The inherent theatricality of “throwing out” *chametz*, critical from a dramaturgical perspective, ensures the structural integrity of the *Seder* practice that follows while simultaneously gendering it as, arguably, female.

The etymology of the word “object” supports Rayner’s phenomenological reading as it literally means, “thrown ahead.” Rayner explains her methodology as simply “a way to imagine the moment when an object makes its appearance as an object, that is, to consider it phenomenologically and psychoanalytically as an emergence of otherness” (73). Expulsion is at the literal core of the word latin word for object, *objecto*: to throw out, to charge, to oppose. The word “expulsion” is therefore necessarily performative. Expulsion is presentational as much as it is dismissive. It is not simply the act of throwing out; it is the *show* of throwing out.

The word contains the act of expulsion that is also a presentation, a show or appearance, even a symptom (as in a “presenting symptom”). The event of expulsion produces subject

and object as reciprocals of each other; it is a point at which a subject also begins to emerge as an object. In its exile the object begins to gather a history for itself, as does the subject each begins to become a representative for its own past and future in relation to the other. (81)

Interestingly, Jewish people performing the *Seder* read a *hagaddah* that tells their narrative as a people who were, quite literally, the objects of expulsion in the Exodus story, as historically they were expelled (released, thrown out) of Egypt, along with their matzah. Historically, the Jewish people can be viewed as extensions of the matzah object, and in a contemporary context women can as well.

In her book *Performing Ground*, Laura Levin analyzes how the female body is situated in space and discusses what her positionality says about the more general problem of place. How do women's bodies problematize "larger spatial paradigms that are invoked to read a given performance?" (20). Levin asks, "What does it mean to think about a concept like geopathology – place-as-problem – given that women are often denied (a) place and made to stand in for the place itself? (20) Levin thinks about gender in relation to space, drawing from Una Chaudhuri's concept of geopathology. She references Chaudhuri's analysis of a Georg Kaiser's expressionist play, *From Morn to Midnight*, theorizing how women's bodies are situated in this set.

One might take this analysis a step further by noting the cluster of female characters that form the background against which the protagonist's geopathic reflexes are played out. Because they are closely linked to household fixtures ... women become formal extensions of the domestic space. They are at once "the space" and "the non-space" that provide the conditions for male self-generation. They are the inexplicable hyphens and ellipses that beleaguer the text. (Levin 21)

This passage is fruitful on a number of levels. First, it addresses both the printed word and the material object, as this project aims to. Levin personifies household fixtures and domestic space as well as hyphens and ellipses, fleshing out the text(ure) of this particular *mise en scène*. Second, her formulation of women as formal extensions of “the space” and “the non-space” works well with the matzah/*chametz* model that governs the Passover *Seder*. Women are “the space” at the *Seder*, as they align with the matzah object and its spiritual utility in the home; so too are they the “non-space” at the *Seder*, as they physicalize the ephemeral “empty space” that the *chametz* ghost inhabits over the course of the ritual.

When orthodox Jewish women read the *hagaddah*, reciting the words “this is the bread of our affliction” in reference to the matzah, I wonder if they are searching for a “completeness of form” theorized by Bernstein (69), as an attempt to use performance to fill the ‘void[s]’ (Burshtein) within a system governed by patriarchal legislation. Performance scholars are particularly good at understanding the many socio-cultural layers of an object. Given the density of matzah (figuratively and literally – matzah has not risen), the statement, “this is the bread of our affliction,” has a double meaning. The paradox of free will that it signifies from a historical viewpoint translates readily to the contemporary moment. The subtext of the phrase, when uttered at a *Seder* today by an orthodox Jewish woman, is, “This is the bread of *my* affliction: the bread that I painstakingly purged from my home after relentless searching and compulsive cleaning, yet that haunts the attics of my home and heart with its looming threat of return.” The Hebrews were anxious upon their release from Egypt (which is precisely why they hustled their departure and did not wait for their bread to rise). But in the splitting of the Red Sea, the Torah states that the women danced: “Miriam the prophetess ... took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with circle dances” (Exodus 15:20, *Complete*

*Tanakh*). The ancient commentator Rashi draws attention to the fact that *the women brought their tambourines from Egypt*. They left in such haste that they couldn't let the bread rise, but they made sure to bring their tambourines. The women were confident that God would make miracles for them, and their instruments were the proof. The Talmud even states that it is "in the merit of the righteous women of that generation [that] our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt" (*Sotah* 11b). There was fear, I am sure, but perhaps it was a productive anxiety – a heightened consciousness, a Kierkegaardian awareness of the in-between. In being in the Red Sea, the space between Egypt and the Promised Land, they embodied a kind of non-space, and through music and action were connected to God and each other.

Women are traditionally responsible for *chametz* – a role passed down, not through bodily surrogation alone, but through scripts that are not merely implicit, but written – and her religious responsibility is heavy. The anxiety that some women in orthodox Jewish communities experience, the need to "get it exactly right," is fostered through the ongoing discursive searching and checking rituals they are constantly engaged in and is precisely the picture that they will necessarily fail to match. This paradox is one of many iterations of a dance structured in such a way that the picture *can never be matched*, a context in which individuality, subjectivity, and performativity are hailed and sincerity, intent, and spirituality result.

## Chapter Four: “Turn it Over; Turn it Over”: Masculinity and *Dreidlich* in Orthodox Dress

*There once was a man named Shalom Shachnah, also known as Shalom the Rattlebrain. Shalom was a businessman, a businessman without a lot of business. He was famous in his shtetl for being a schlemiel, a fool, a failure. But things were looking up for him as he suddenly had the opportunity to leave his small shtetl and make a real estate deal, a deal that would change his life.*

*Now, Shalom had to take the train. A new ordeal for a small world shtetl man, and to make matters worse he had a stopover before his final destination. He was worried about missing his train and not arriving home in time for Pesach.*

*Shalom had an idea. He found a peasant and told him to be sure to wake him up at a specific time. He even paid him a hefty tip. He found a bench to sit upon. Now, seated upon this bench was a Russian official with a grey uniform covered in buttons, and a very official looking hat with a big red stripe. He had stretched himself out and fallen asleep. Shalom squeezed himself in and propped up his bag and his hat and soon fell into a deep sleep. Just as he had hoped, he was awakened by the peasant. He grabbed his bag, reached for his hat, and ran to the train.*

*But the line was so long. He would never make his train on time.*

*To his shock, the people began to part and let him pass on forward. They all get out of his way, all the while calling him Sir, and bowing in respect. Even upon entering the train, he gets the star treatment, gets moved to first class, treated like a king, like a real somebody. But Shalom has no idea why. “What is going on here?” he thinks.*

*When he enters the first-class car, he passes by a mirror, glances at his reflection and sees the Russian official’s hat with the red stripe upon his head. He thinks, “Cursed be that*

*peasant! I told him to wake me up twenty times! I even gave him a tip. He must have woken up that Russian official beside me. He must have left me asleep on the bench.”*

*Shalom Shachnah turns right around and rushes off the train to find himself asleep on the bench and wakes himself up, and just at that moment the train rushes out of the station. He misses Pesach. All on account of a hat.*

- Bailey Newman

From "The Hat in the Mirror," *Biladye*: 21 Aug. 2014 [a retelling of "On Account of a Hat" by Sholom Aleichem]

## Introduction

There are four classical methods of Jewish biblical exegesis used by rabbis and Bible scholars to read stories: *peshat*, which means “surface,” or “straight,” refers to a direct reading of a text; *remez*, which means “hints,” refers to the deep or allegoric meanings of a text; *derash*, which means “inquire,” refers to a *midrashic* (comparative) reading, and *sod*, which means “secret” or “mystery,” and refers to a mystical reading.

A *remez* reading of the Shalom Shachnah story is that it is a metaphor for the ways in which Jewish people have been perceived by others throughout history: Shalom is the Jew, the Russian official is the dominant culture, and the peasant is history. For centuries, and across many different contexts, Jewish people have been hailed by dominant culture in various ways. At the end of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, Jews were assigned distinctive yellow caps and were forced to segregate; at the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish garb was banned and Jews were forced to assimilate; at the end of the twentieth century, Jews dressed for citizenship in order to fit in. Various junctures in history have framed the Jew as the other. On the train belonging to a secular culture, the Jew was treated differently – sometimes better, often worse –

and there he stood, not always aware of what he was wearing, what he was saying, or who he even was. In the words of Foucault, “People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 164). Jews knew what they wore, and they knew why there wore what they wore, but what did their wearing do?

This chapter differs from those that precede it because I analyse clothing as a means of understanding how the perception of ‘failing’ to perform the law, and the frustration derived from that experience of failure, creates opportunity for transformation, meaning, individuation, and even progressive movement toward liberalism within orthodox *halacha*. At the same time, this chapter extends the essential throughline of this dissertation, which deconstructs how a process of ‘striving toward’ within orthodoxy – in this case, orthodox men engaging with religious costume and its religious baggage – is a powerful spiritual tool, stemming from the central tenets of Jewish tradition.

Clothing is hugely important in Jewish culture. Orthodox men and women dress distinctively. This is a fact that outsiders are fascinated by (evidenced by the myriad of filmmakers and authors that emphasize it) and insiders are deeply invested in. The specific meanings of clothing differ significantly from community to community (and individual to individual). In the Chassidic community alone the variations are many: *Satmar* Chassidim dress differently from *Belz*, who dress differently from *Breslov* who dress differently from *Lubavitch*. There are over two dozen sects of Chassidim – each determined by (and named after) the geographical location (key town in Eastern Europe) from which they derived and each with their own vestimentary customs—from varieties of *shtreimels* (fur hats) to *bekeshes* (frock coats) for men and from stockings to snoods and *tichels* for women. The same goes for the numerous

strands of Sephardic Jews, originating from Spain, Portugal, Morocco, as well as countries in South America and West and East Asia. But one common denominator is that the nuances of dress are important. I view Jewish clothing and its infinite variations as a rich source of data in understanding Jewish law as world-making. I address the significance of dress for men in this chapter and the significance for women in the chapter that follows.

A *derash* reading of the Shalom Shachnah story shows how clothing can be a catalyst for men viewing *themselves* differently. Shalom does not believe he is wearing the wrong hat (the rational response). The story is funny because Shalom believes that *he* changed, not the hat. Being treated differently clues him to the fact that he isn't truly himself, which is why he rushes back to the train station.

It is his hat that incites Shalom to think differently about himself. Similarly, orthodox men in this community are prompted by costume to think about and investigate who they are. And it is in this process of self-perception – Who am I in relation to this hat that I'm supposed to wear? – that men negotiate the gap between “community expectations and self-determination” (Zilberman).

In orthodox tradition, on a boy's third birthday his hair is cut for the first time (short in the back with sidelocks remaining at his sides) in a traditional ceremony called an *upsherin*, during which he is given his first kippah (yarmulke) and *tzitzit* (special fringes) to wear. It is traditional for parents to give the toddler his first lesson in the Hebrew alphabet that day. During the *upsherin* ceremony, many sing the traditional verse from Deuteronomy 33:4, “The Torah was commanded to us through Moses, an inheritance for all the Jewish people.” This verse in Hebrew begins with the words “*Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe*, which, interestingly, is an acronym for the Hebrew word, *tzelem*, “image.” A boy's entry into language goes hand in hand with his learning

of identity through object relation.

Identity and vestimentary practices are tied to together in the fringes of the *tzitzit* bestowed upon young boys, and this is a kind of cultural origin story for orthodox Jewish men, whether they experienced an *upsherin* first-hand or not. It is part of what Carl Jung calls their “collective unconscious” (1). Regardless of orthodox affiliation, the cultural knowledge of this ritual creates an ideological backdrop for the beginning of boyhood. This is ‘the beginning of the story’ for many Jewish men – kippah and *tzitzit* create and produce a boyhood experience – and it is in relationship to these items that many begin a process of determining their (masculine) identity.

This ideological backdrop, however, begins much further back, originating with the famous biblical paradigm of Jacob and his fraternal twin, Esau. Contemporary images of Jewish masculinity begin with this ancient dichotomy. Esau was the first child and was born covered in hair; Jacob was the second and followed his brother, holding on to his heel. The Torah states in Genesis 25:23 that the brothers struggled even in Rebecca’s womb: “Two nations are in your womb,” said God, “and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (*Complete Tanakh*). The commentator Rashi cites a famous midrash (ancient commentary on the scriptures) on this verse, illustrating that when Rebecca would pass a place of Torah study, Jacob was drawn toward it, and when she passed a place of idol worship, Esau was drawn toward it. Jacob desired the spiritual; Esau, the physical. As children, Jacob spent his time at home engaged in Torah study while Esau worked in the fields. In orthodox tradition, Jacob represents truth and authenticity and Esau represents materialism and manipulation. The legacy of these iconic images – Jacob as the Torah scholar and Esau as the hunter and warrior – remain in the collective Jewish psyche.

The most interesting part of this Bible story is what transpires between the two brothers as adults. In the book of Genesis 25, Esau returns from the fields famished and Jacob was waiting for him, having already cooked an aromatic lentil soup (you can't make this stuff up). When Esau demands that his brother share his soup, Jacob negotiates a trade for Esau's birthright, bestowed upon him as the first-born (29-34). This is the first time Jacob demonstrates cunning, a character trait that is quintessentially Esau's. One of the teachings that I learned about this story is that Jacob *became* Esau that day, in a quiet, concentrated, controlled way. A few chapters later in Genesis 27, Rebecca counsels Jacob to disguise himself as Esau in order to receive a blessing from Isaac (to which, ironically, Jacob is already entitled, since he had previously acquired Esau's birthright in exchange for lentil soup). When Isaac asks in verse 18, "Which one of my sons are you?" Jacob answers with the exact words, "I am, Esau is your first born." In the book *Truth in Numbers, Insights into the Book of Bereshis*, Reuven Wolfeld argues that because Jacob represents pure *emet*, truth, he uses this precise wording so as not to tell a lie (Wolfeld). Shmuel Reichman posits in an article, "The Relationship between Yaakov and Esav That Could Have Been" that even the words "I am Esau, your firstborn" would have been true, since they speak to Jacob's "existential metamorphosis":

He took on Esav (Esau)'s role, and in a deep way, *became* Esav. In respect to his spiritual role, Yaakov (Jacob) was now both Yaakov *and* Esav (emphasis added). Yaakov, the pillar of truth, didn't lie to Yitzchak (Isaac); he revealed the inner truth of this new spiritual reality, his new spiritual role. (Reichman)

The Jacob and Esau paradigm is an interesting paradox; the essence of Jacob is truth and authenticity, and yet he needs a piece of Esau – his physical strength, his scrappiness, and his ability to manipulate others to his own advantage – as an antidote to help Jacob survive in the

world. In the Torah, Esau achieves some degree of success; despite his unsavoury actions, God rewards him for honouring his father and Isaac recognizes him for his physical strength. Joseph Friedman argues that

Isaac hoped that some aspects of the physical “Hands of Esau,” referred to in Genesis (27:22), could somehow be integrated into the studious, spiritual “Voice of Jacob.” He wanted Jacob to become skilled enough to survive the upcoming exile. He believed that Jacob would need some of Esau’s cunning in order to survive the vicissitudes of dealing with a pagan world. (122)

According to Friedman, Isaac verbally informs Esau that he had knowingly given Jacob the blessing that ostensibly belonged to Esau, because Jacob had used his street-smarts to obtain it (a theory supported by the ancient commentator Targum Onkelos in Genesis 27:35). Friedman contends that the Esau archetype, the “Exile Jew” as he calls it, “may appear subservient in some respects to his surrounding culture, but he is looking to the future” (122). He concludes that “Isaac wants Jacob to have the mind-set and values of a ‘Sovereign Jew’ (the Jacob archetype) while strategically taking the actions of an ‘Exile Jew’ (the Esau archetype)” (122).

Circling back to the Shalom Shachnah story: Shalom turns around to find the “real him” back at the train station. Turning around is a metaphor for a complicated process of self-identification; Jacob does so when he “turns into” Esau, if only for a moment, when he poses as his brother for the blessing. He even goes as far as to wear the fur of a goat on his hands and neck in order to pass as his woolly twin when being physically touched by his semi-blind father. In a moment of biblical dramatic irony, Isaac knows it’s Jacob and not Esau and yet plays along with the role reversal, gives Jacob the blessing of the *bechor*, eldest. While not transgressing *halacha*, Jacob (with the assistance of his mother, Rebecca) bends the rules by wearing a

costume, by changing himself, and succeeds in achieving his goal while (arguably) maintaining some semblance of truth and authenticity.

The performance of turning around, and turning in relation to, that this chapter of my dissertation explores, pendulates between the tangible and the intangible, the physical and the spiritual, the Jacob and the Esau. And in many cases clothing is used as a conduit, like the wool that Jacob wears when he sneaks the blessing of the *bechor*. On a macro level, Jewish men have performed different roles throughout history depending on what was required and what they were up against. Esau is summoned and Jacob dismissed depending on the historical context – one that originates in and is supported by the Torah itself. When cunning is required, Esau’s hat is worn; when authenticity is desired, Jacob’s. It is interesting to pay attention to the global trends of dress amongst Jewish men throughout history, which I outline in this chapter, as they offer an interesting framework for this vestimentary study of (dis)identification. More important to me, however, is the delineation of turning around and bending the rules as a paradigm for agency via performance, for which the Torah itself provides a model. The practice of drawing on different hats, the Jacob hat and the Esau hat, is a paradox that involves negotiating the gap between societal acceptance and expressions of faith.

I use the Yiddish term “*dreidlich*” in this chapter because I believe it embodies the kind of cunning, twisting movement that I describe as a male-dominated performance practice in orthodox Jewish communities. The figurative spinning ritual of using clothing or hats to “turn” or “turn into” I name *dreidlich*, a term I first heard used by a man named Luzer in the documentary *One of Us*, directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady:

I feel less ex-Chassidic in L.A. I feel more like a regular person ... I feel like, just a dude. You know, I’m doing what everyone else in L.A. is trying to do: try to get auditions and

get acting jobs, try to survive. So now I'm driving Uber, and doing, you know, *dreidlich*. You know what *dreidlich* are? You know ... [makes spinning motion] they're ... [makes spinning motion again] ... it's not illegal, it's ... creative ways of making money. (Ewing 20:26)

I googled the word *dreidlich* after hearing it in the film and was surprised to learn that there is almost no information available on it. The only thing I could find was the Yiddish derivative of the word dreidel, a four-sided spinning top customarily played with during the holiday of Chanukah. I asked a few people I know who were raised *Charedi* if they had heard this term, and their response, like Google, was the Yiddish iteration of dreidel, the spinning top, and not its colloquial double. When I inquired to one individual as to whether he had ever heard the term in the context that Luzer describes in the film, he explained that there is a pejorative association with the term *dreidlich* – that it refers to shady business dealings and not being on the up-and-up. However, etymologically, the two terms – *dreidel*, a spinning top, and *dreidlich*, working around the law, come from the same root meaning. In other words, to do *dreidlich* means to spin round and round the law without actually transgressing it.

Luzer's hand motion in the film reminds me of a joke from my childhood about a whirlpool: when asked the question, "What is a whirlpool?" everyone always responds with the same hand gesture, a spinning finger. The joke was that no one can describe this object in words; everyone answers by doing the same gesture. Similarly, there is no good definition for *dreidlich*; it can only be described gesturally.

In the original version of Aleichem's short story, Shalom Shachnah does *dreidlich* with his real estate deals and also by horsing around and engaging in all kinds of tomfoolery. He acquires the title of a *schlemiel*, a "village idiot," a fool, an outsider. In the abbreviated version

included in this chapter's opening passage, Shalom does not wear the proper clothes (he is not wearing a hat). This story is not about someone who breaks the law but rather about someone who is trying to come to terms with an image or a label that is projected onto him, represented by clothing and dress, like a hat. In this way, the hat is a catalyst for consciousness; Shalom's personal reflection begins at the end of the story in relation to the red hat, when he turns around.

I understand Shalom's "turning around" to be a metaphor for the turning, stretching, and expanding of cultural conventions and religious norms in orthodox Jewish communities, and Shalom's use of clothing in particular speaks to the experiences of men in/with Jewish law. In this chapter I argue that by working around the law and by testing its limits, men experience self-consciousness as well as, in some cases, deeper engagement with orthodoxy. Shalom's turning around in the story stands in for the larger set of "turning around practices" that orthodox men have adopted today in order to survive and thrive in their respective communities. Like Shalom's relationship to the hat, the men in this chapter express their relation to their ritual dress. And just like Shalom turns around to see his reflection in the mirror, and later he turns around to find himself at the train station, so, too, do the orthodox men in these pages turn around and turn around again, performing *dreidlich* in various forms, in relation to an image of orthodoxy that begins with kippah and *tzitzit* and has no end.

Is *dreidlich* a performance practice that existed for centuries among orthodox men? It is certainly possible. In this chapter, I mention the various hats (literal and figurative) worn by Jewish men throughout the twentieth century and earlier, in order to stand out and blend in. I imagine that orthodox men historically did find creative ways of coping with the limitations and expectations that were placed upon them, and of expressing their individuality, possibly through clothing. While extensive analyses on these historical vestimentary practices are beyond the

scope of this dissertation, I provide some historical context for religious Jewish men performing gender and sexuality.

Daniel Boyarin's book *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* explores themes of homosociality and homoeroticism in the Talmud extensively, specifically between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish (*Baba Metsia* 84a). In *The Passing Game*, Warren Hoffman discusses how Talmudic moments like these are "homoerotically charged but... would not necessarily be termed gay or homosexual... in a contemporary setting" (4-5). His understanding of queerness as expansive is particularly useful when thinking about how *dreidlich* can be understood historically. Hoffman states that, like Boyarin, he understands queer "not as not as an indication of a necessarily homosexual or gay subject position but as a marker of any sexual practice that 'puts into question any praxis, theoretical or political, of the 'natural' in sexuality'" (4-5). Following this thinking, it is perhaps helpful to think of *dreidlich* as a kind of queering or at least a continuation of these kinds of queer readings of Jewish culture that date back to antiquity. For the contemporary context in which the present study is situated, I believe that *dreidlich* is a contemporary queering of orthodox norms, and extend toward a longer (certainly biblical) tradition, of modes of behaviour that orthodox men have adopted in order to survive and feel fulfilled as active participants of orthodox Jewry, while not abandoning Talmudic custom. I believe that *dreidlich* is a practice that draws from a spirit of Jewish tradition to question the status quo, while remaining inside a broader ideological system. "Turn it over, turn it over," Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag says in the final Mishnah of the Talmud in *Pirkei Avot*, "for everything is contained within [the Torah]" (*Avot* 5:26).

Like a dreidel, *dreidlich* is multi-sided and can manifest multiple combinations with

varying results. Dreidels, like dice, are finite objects that, when played, have infinite significations. Similarly, male dress within orthodoxy is finite in its materiality (specific clothes and objects have prescribed uses and aesthetics); however, when played (with), have perpetual possibilities. In my historical analysis of Jewish masculinity, I suggest that hyper-masculinity can be a sign of orthodox modernity, a rejection of the European feminized Jew that preceded it. I am often seeing *dreidlich* today as performance of male Jewishness that at times returns to pre-modern traditionalism in their disidentifications. However, these movements are ever-changing, *dreidlich* is not tied to any particular historical moment. It can change from community to community, year to year, moment to moment, and in a single breath. *Dreidlich* is an individual performance practice that uses the body to give space and voice to individual religious expression. It is an evolving action that works *with* the traditions and laws that a person buys into, and can produce newfound pleasure and self-consciousness in its performance.

I consider those who practice their individual, unique adaptations of orthodoxy progressive because they are creating new avenues for this sect while maintaining its core precepts. However, many consider these moves outside the orthodox norm strange, heretical, inappropriate, and so forth. Yoav, for example, a participant in this study, wears something he calls a *gamees*, clothing that, according to him, has more religious significance than that which typically signifies orthodoxy, like a black hat, for example, which has no biblical significance (beyond being a headcovering) but evolved through European fashion over time. However, because Yoav believes that the wearing of the *gamees* is no longer common practice, his performance is read by many in his community as ‘fringe orthodoxy,’ when he considers it to be more technically Jewish than majority of the clothing worn in synagogue. The wearing of traditional Jewish objects in a setting that no longer recognizes them as such is a subversive (but

not transgressive) act, rationalized by a Talmudic tradition that is central to Judaism.

Reflecting on her *Daf Yomi* practice, Ilana Kurshan argues that the spirit of Talmudic practice – indeed, its defining feature as a genre – is the process of being “caught up in the flow of the argumentation and tossed around like a rough wave when the back-and-forth between the rabbis [becomes] particularly stormy” (8). It is true that there is something essentially Jewish about *questioning* Jewish dogma, as medieval commentators like Rashi, Radak, Ramban and others have done for generations in the canonical commentaries of the *Tanach* (Tanakh). I believe that individual, iterative interpretations of rabbinic law that reframe, rework, and reimagine traditional customs, while upholding the central tenets of *halacha*, are essentially progressive acts.

The significance that Yoav ascribes to the *gamees* he wears empowers him religiously and infuses his practice with intention. I view this disidentification or “subversion” (I use quotations to mark the irony of labelling the act of wearing a religious Jewish object in a religious Jewish community as subversive) as progressive because it models the carving of new, meaningful paths for orthodox people, which may be outside the orthodox norm but use the very material of its administration, and overcome adversity in doing so. Orthodox people in Toronto who follow the rules but also “do their own thing” are often judged unfavourably. Those who march to the beat of their own drummer are still recognized *halachically* in contemporary orthodox culture, insofar as they would be ‘counted’ (i.e. *halachically* recognized) in a *minyan* (quorum) at synagogue or for *sheva brachot* (the seven blessings after a marriage ceremony); however, they are often viewed sceptically, even if their actions do not negate *halacha*. If a man wears *tefillin* all day and not just during prayer services, for example (something that Yoav does), he might be stigmatized, even if the actions are considered *halachically* defensible. Other

so-called secular practices, like wearing a tuxedo, doing stand-up comedy, or creating YouTube videos, which are some examples in this ethnography that deviate from the mainstream in orthodox communities in Toronto, are likewise met with prejudice.

I have hope that, over time, these 'progressive' actions will become normalized, since it is only through the ongoing, discursive, reiterative performance of 'odd' behaviour that it is ultimately reinforced. When idiosyncratic actions such as these become pervasive, the concept of a more personalized orthodoxy can infiltrate the mainstream and the narrow paths of orthodoxy can expand.

It is often the case with agents of social change that the first one through the door gets hurt. Generally speaking, orthodox Jewish institutions resist change, which has been historically hard on the innovators. When Sara Schenirer, the woman who opened the first orthodox Jewish school for girls in 1918, initially approached her brother with the idea of establishing Jewish education for girls and women, the first Bais Yaakov school, she was told that the idea would not catch on (Sternbuch 203). Now there are thousands of Bais Yaakov schools across the world. As recently as ten years ago, *Charedi* schools in Toronto did not permit their students' families to have internet in their homes, and those who did were viewed as outliers. Now, internet in the home is more accepted. *Yoatzot Halacha*, women who are trained to answer women's questions about *niddah*, are still being met with suspicion and distrust by many mainstream orthodox rabbis (Joffe 256) despite being widely supported and recognized by modern orthodox organizations such as the Orthodox Union, Mizrachi Canada, and Nishmat: The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Jewish Study for Women. Many orthodox practices that embrace modernity and depart from the mainstream are initially challenged and stigmatized but are slowly integrated over time.

Shalom Shachnah's story, like many of those that diverge from the norms of orthodox Jewish communities, doesn't end in a climactic triumph. In fact, his moment of self-consciousness causes him to miss the train that will take him home in time for Pesach. Similarly, the men in the present ethnography do not reach their "destination"; however, the purpose of this ethnography is to question the construct of that destination in the first place. Does Shalom find himself? No. What he sees in the mirror is an image of perfection (class, status, beauty), and he strives toward that, a striving toward that takes place on a train, a journey. Quite a lot of turning around occurs for the men presented in the pages that follow, as they swirl around the many Talmudic laws that govern almost every minute of the day – when to pray, when to eat, when to learn, when to sleep, and all the blessings before and after and in-between. Physical dress is just one of many things that cause men to do *dreidlich*, to curve around the law while not actually doing anything illegal. It turns out that all of this turning around is actually very important in establishing the terms for individuality in Jewish culture, for asserting oneself (as Bernstein's chef's knife does in chapter three) and articulating authenticity and good faith when practising religious law.

The rules for playing dreidel on the holiday of Chanukah are simple. Each side of the dreidel bears a letter for the Hebrew alphabet, which is used as a mnemonic for the actions players take in the gambling game: "Nun" stands for the Yiddish word *nisht* (nothing), "He" stands for *halb* (half), "Gimel" for *gants* (all), and "Shin" for *shtel ayn* (put in). The letters also form an acronym for the Hebrew phrase, "*Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*", "a great miracle happened there"; i.e., Israel. In Israel, though, the letters read, "*Nes Gadol Haya Po*", "a great miracle happened *here*". Like the spinning top, the outcome of the *dreidlich* motion, the swirling in and out of and between and within the law, is a gamble – a risk. And yet, I believe that wherever it

happens – ‘here,’ ‘there’ – it is a kind of miracle in that it represents a divine spark within every human being to change and to create.

While I understand that *dreidlich* is used colloquially to refer to sketchy business dealings, in this chapter I reclaim this term to mean something else: a productive site of identity-formation.<sup>20</sup> The turning toward and away from the specific dictates for rigid orthodox clothing practices is and can be a unique opportunity for meaning-making and spirituality in Judaism. I have in previous chapters discussed identity as a negotiation between the self and the law and the space in between; *dreidlich* is in many ways a continuation of these self-reflexive processes of identity formation. Similar to how orthodox women play with identity through the commandments related to hair-covering, men interact with the religious objects they don, working with and against Jewish images and symbols in the process. Because the history of Jewish men’s clothing is so layered, the phenomenon of working with these materials to express individuality is different than that for Jewish women. The symbols invoked in male dress are phenomenologically complex; they construct various, often contradictory images of Jewish masculinity that men seem to be working against. Objects like the kippah, *tzitzit*, and *tefillin* represent large, abstract, ideological principles in Judaism. Aiden, one of the participants in this ethnography, states that a kippah feels like a weight on his head. (Fittingly, *tefillin* is an object

---

<sup>20</sup> Please note that, in *Yeshivish* culture, *dreidlich* has negative connotations: to *drei* means to turn, to curve, to be shady and not a straight shooter, to be dishonest. This is not the meaning that I intend when I use this term; rather, I employ it in the context of performance theory as a way to understand and deconstruct how male dress in orthodox culture is *poiesis*, and how symbolic objects can play a vital role in facilitating disidentification. I believe that paying attention to the cultural construction of *dreidlich* as a performance practice in contemporary orthodoxy can be helpful in understanding the lifeworlds that swirl around it. It is possible that some in this community might take offense to my re-interpretation of this term, given its association with acting dishonestly, but I sincerely hope to make clear that my use of this term is in its most literal sense – to spin, veer, or turn – which, as I assert, can serve a very functional and even noble role (like Jacob’s swapping of the blessing of the *bechor*) and grander, more intangible but equally vital identificatory purposes.

that rests literally on one's forehead.) *Dreidlich* is distinctly male in that it is a turning away from a clearly defined (if not constantly revised) uniform for masculinity that carries historical baggage. That said, *dreidlich* shares the same methodology as other cultural traditions in that it uses disidentification and 'spinning around the law' as a process of identity formation.

We find in literature, film, and television, several representations of Jewish men struggling with their "uniform" and what it represents. In the 2017 film *Menashe*, filmmaker Joshua Z. Weinstein portrays Menashe the grocer as a "Shalom the Rattlebrain" type in a Chassidic neighbourhood in Borough Park. Constantly berated by his boss and others for being a *schlemiel*, Menashe is often late and is prone to blunders. He is a widower and his community insists that his son be raised in a home with a mother. The community Rabbi has ruled that, until Menashe remarries, his son, Rieven, will live with an aunt and uncle. That said, he has allowed for father and son to spend one week together before Rieven returns to those relatives.

In a review in the *Washington Post*, Alan Zilberman posits that Menashe struggles to "negotiate the gap between community expectations and self-determination" (Zilberman). It is true that Menashe's herculean struggle for control over his life gets in the way of his religious commitments and of the cultural rhythms of Chassidic Borough Park. Menashe's struggle with image and authenticity finds expression through Jewish vestimentary practices. Like Shalom Shachnah, Menashe believes that his successes and failures are tangled up with the way he is dressed. When Shalom succeeds on the train, he looks in the mirror and immediately attributes his status to his impressive hat. He assumes it must be false and returns to the train station to recover his former self, the "real him." The opposite occurs in *Menashe*, when Menashe slips and falls over and over again and attributes this to what, in his view, his Jewish garb lacks. Though he dons a white shirt, *tzitzit*, a traditional black vest and traditional slacks, a velvet yarmulke, and

sidelocks, several characters in the film, including his adolescent son, still remark on Menashe's improper dress. "Why don't you wear a hat and coat like everyone else?" Rieven implores his father. "You'd look much nicer" (11:56).

Menashe's version of *dreidlich*, his way of turning round and round the law without actually transgressing, comes across in perhaps one of the most touching scenes, when he studies Torah with Rieven in the *Bais Midrash*, the orthodox study hall. While teaching his son a parable on the strength of the lion, he growls like one and prompts his son to do the same. "How does a lion sound?" he teases Rieven, lovingly, twirling his *payot* (sidelocks). "No, you sound like a cow. A lion!" (31:08). As the surrounding Torah scholars stare them down in judgement (this kind of horsing around – or unconventional teaching at the least – is considered rowdy and uncouth in a house of Torah), father and son proceed to impersonate barnyard animals, doubling over in laughter. Menashe refuses to reject the rules of his *Chassidic* community outright, but he cannot blend in either. He seems to genuinely subscribe to his life in Borough Park, ever striving toward *halachic* stringency and correctness; however, his true colours as a father – the parent in him who will moo like a cow with his son in a study hall – is ever-present, too. And it is precisely this collision that renders this character, a man who chooses to negotiate *halacha* from within its regulatory practices, so compelling.

Henry Bial posits in *Acting Jewish* that the concept of acting Jewish is based on the idea of identity as performance ... acting Jewish displaces the question of authenticity away from an appeal to a fixed textual authority (whether the Torah or some other formulation). Instead, the authentic is constantly in motion, circulating in an ongoing conversation between performance and audience. (15–16)

In the following ethnography, I present material that reflects Menashe's struggle for this culturally-specific kind of authenticity. Authenticity, as Bial explains, is always in motion, and this particular strand of identities in motion is what I characterize in the present chapter as "Jewish costume": the entwinement of clothing, authenticity, and identity in orthodox communities of men.

Truth and authenticity are extremely important to the men in this ethnography (as they were to their forefather Jacob) and are fibrous threads that weave through the clothes men wear and the religious objects they adorn in orthodox contexts. The men in this ethnography often find the actions of living orthodoxly and in good faith contradictory, and it is through clothing that they work through this paradox of identity. Specifically, the research participants expressed *inability to live up to the image that these vestimentary choreographies construct*. And it is ironically this dynamic that allows for their authentic religious expression.

The Shalom Shachnah parable can set the stage for a conversation about these themes. Shalom's "costume," the reflected image of his impressive hat, causes him not to recognize himself and to see himself as a fraud. Shalom looks in the mirror and interprets the image of success that he sees as necessarily false. He gives up and never makes it home for Pesach. *Menashe* has the opposite ending. Here, the antihero Menashe acquires a hat and coat, fulfilling the wishes of his son and others, and changes – indeed chooses – his costume, despite his reluctance to submit to this strand of orthodoxy. His choice gives him a path to retaining custody of his son. Whether he finds freedom in this choice or not is unknown, but possibilities emerge from his choice to submit. The men in this ethnography have chosen orthodoxy: they submit to rabbinic authority on a global level and to rabbinic law on the quotidian. And yet, amidst their submission, they assert a kind of deviance that cannot be characterized as defiant nor complicit.

These behaviours – micro-aggressions, almost – hover over the stratosphere of *halacha* but dare not transgress it. While the scope of this dissertation is limited to contemporary ethnographies, I believe that *dreidlich* has been expressed by orthodox men throughout history in a multitude of forms, not the least of which being how they have dressed. *Tzitzit* out, sidelocks curled, yellow cap off, black fedora on, knitted kippah worn high, velvet yarmulke worn low – *dreidlich* looks different in every context. However, the practice of swirling around the law, constructing choreographies that prove arguably more socially poignant than the laws they attempt to express, remains a constant. *Dreidlich* provides a philosophical foundation for the deviations of progressive orthodox Jewish men—individuals who create new avenues for orthodoxy while maintaining *halacha*.

Jewish tradition promotes this kind of disidentification from its Talmudic roots; like the *mikveh* and Passover performances, male dress is an example of how Jewish tradition evokes disidentification. What differentiates *dreidlich* as a performance practice, however, is the idea of bending the law without breaking it. The women in chapters two and three lean into the law in interesting and creative ways and feel pleasure and empowerment as a result; the men with whom I have spoken are conscious of an image that they are working with and against. Some identify as rebels and others imagine themselves as simply fitting in within a culture. Some who rebel against community norms use this flexibility to rationalize their actions as coincident with what they are being asked to do. And some actively create new ways of observing *halacha*, paving the way for others to break the mold and transcend cultural barriers they find limiting, while still remaining inside a system that feels true and safe for them. What connects all of these actions is consciousness: the moment when Shalom Shachnah turns back and realizes that he is *not* the person he thought he was, and what he chooses to do as a result. Whether someone

pushes against the construct of a uniform (like Mendel) or they embrace it wholeheartedly (like Yoav), both actions presuppose awareness; even an embracing of orthodox garb is a reaction to the system from which it derives, a nod to an image that is necessarily unachievable, one that is born (figuratively) at the age of three and is impossible in its perfection. Regardless of individual impetus, each iteration of clothing ritual performs the same repetitive Beckettian hat trick; he puts on the hat, he takes off the hat (again and again). Identity and authenticity are ever in motion.

#### Historical Context

Jewish boys and men have been instructed to dress Jewishly throughout history, weaving multiple narratives into the origin story of Jewish clothing. In *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*, Eric Silverman traces a cultural genealogy of Jewish clothing. He leans on anthropologist Clifford Geertz for a method that “approaches the text (the Torah) as an Israelite experience, a story Israelites told themselves about themselves” (2). The Torah specifies, Silverman argues, that Jews must adhere to a particular mode of dress: donning phylacteries (*tefillin*) and special fringes (*tzitzit*) are two examples. Interestingly, what has become Jewish garb was historically constructed either in support of, or opposition to, a secular norm. Silverman states that “all Jews dressed, even if unaware, either to welcome the future or to bemoan it” (xvi). Garments that Jews wore, and the ways in which they wore them, materialized a Jewish image. Vestimentary objects produced the bodies that adorned them. This profoundly affected the narrative that Jews told themselves about themselves.

Most historians agree that, while medieval Jews did, in fact, dress distinctively, Jews in antiquity, by contrast, did not. Steven Fine claims in his book *How Do You Know a Jew When You See One?* that nowhere in Philo, Josephus, rabbinic literature, or visual culture is there

evidence that Jews dressed in ways different from those of the dominant culture (20). So, if Jews have not always differentiated themselves through clothing – at least not necessarily in antiquity, as Fine argues – and their extraordinary distinctiveness is a relatively modern phenomenon, how can we make meaning of the hyper-performative vestimentary practices of orthodox men today? What cultural purpose does their dress code serve? Or, to paraphrase Roach, what cultural death or void do they serve to memorialize? How does the accumulation of literally hundreds of *halachot* on this matter substitute the loss of an original, stand-in for Jacob or Esau? How have Jewish men historically used the body to negotiate culture and religion within politically oppressive environments, and what does identity look like today as Jewish bodies advance this legacy?

Scholars have taken up questions of vestimentary identification and disidentification, which inform this study. Anna-Katharina Höpflinger explores how clothing is “interlinked with fundamental mechanisms of orientation in social networks” in her article “*Clothing as a Meaningful Marker of Space: A Comparative Approach to Embodied Religion from a Cultural Studies Perspective*” (177). Höpflinger posits that individuals navigate social interactions through clothing and that human apparel can respond to gender, age, social status, and ideas of beauty. She analyses how human bodies move through space in clothing as well as how spaces move through human bodies, interacting with social and religious differences and hierarchies, and even constructing the body itself. Karin Knorr Cetina’s term “viscourse” is useful as part of the theoretical framework for this chapter. Knorr Cetina uses this term to understand how visual codes construct physical sciences. Viscourse is “a form of coordinated knowledge production involving collective communication... including interactions with technical objects [and] presentation of visual material” (Roethe 150). Performance scholar Amelia Jones references an

old aphorism in her article, “‘Clothes Make the Man’: The Male Artist as a Performative Function,” extending Anne Hollander’s adaptation that “clothes make, not the man, but the image of man” (18). Jones argues that “identity is not fixed by clothing but takes its meanings through an exchange between subjects, communicated through sartorial codes” (18). Jones refers to Hegel’s observation that “it is *clothing* that allows communication to occur between subjects, that allows one to speak to the other as a discrete being...[because] without clothing...both bodies would appear ‘the same’” (18). Jones applies these ideas to the western male artist, examining how conventional masculine identities have been “reinforced or subverted through artistic dress” (18).

This chapter extends Jones’ research by studying how conventional masculine identities represented in Jewish scripture and culture have been reinforced and subverted through religious garb. I believe that Jewish clothing accomplishes three tasks in this context: (1) to differentiate and self-preserve, (2) to assimilate and self-protect, and (3) most importantly, to aspire toward self-actualization and faith through ongoing negotiation with and against its multiple discourses. This chapter begins with a performance ethnography that analyzes how, historically, a story has been mapped onto Jewish bodies and asks what that story has accomplished and continues to accomplish culturally. It attempts to understand how Jewish identities were and are constructed via various forms of *dreidlich* in relation to an ideal that does not exist and possibly never existed, one that even the biblical Jewish forefathers fought over and sought to obtain. Using Roach’s concept of surrogation, I examine several distinctly Jewish items of clothing, specifically *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, arguing that the very structure of orthodox laws concerning dress sets up an impossible ideal and that this tension frames *dreidlich* performances as a natural response to an exceptionally rigorous legislative regime. The analysis seeks to understand how

the inability of orthodox men to meet certain standards of Jewish maleness is a critical site of misfire in Jewish culture. Yet it is also an opportunity for men to work out their beliefs and try to find some connection between body and soul.

Let us examine Shalom Shachnah's hat. Used historically to both oppress Jews from the outside and to distinguish Jews from within, hats are complicated sites of performativity. In the eighteenth century, French law required Jews to wear old-fashioned yellow hats as part of a larger anti-Semitic ideology; the vast majority of the rest of the population wore black caps. In an April 1790 festival, however, "Jews of Avignon, flush with the revolutionary promise of Libert , Egalit , and Fraternit , donned black hats to dance with their Gentile compatriots – themselves [gentiles] clad in yellow caps," which was a reversal of roles (Silverman 72). "One year later," cultural anthropologist Eric Silverman writes, "the Jews of Avignon finally received... citizenship... [and] could now enjoy the black hat so symbolic of French fashion and equality" (72). It was only in the early twentieth century, however, that the signature ebony fedora became popularized. The fedora as a style of hat was born on a theatre stage in 1887 when it was first worn by Sarah Bernhardt in the original French production of Victorien Sardou's play *F dora* (Hand 72) and was subsequently integrated into American and European fashion. The trend of the black fedora – interestingly, made of wool (the same material that Jacob wore to deceive his father) – was adopted shortly thereafter by orthodox Jewish communities in Europe and North America as Jewish male garb in the twentieth century. Therefore, the original black hat was worn Jewishly as part of a larger strategy to fit into dominant culture, and has in recent decades become the brand of one of the most distinctly Jewish images. "Ironically," argues Silverman, "the very same modernity shunned by traditionalists actually created their customary attire" (73). One century later, imperial Russian decrees prohibited all stereotypical Jewish dress, including

silk hoods, fur hats, short trousers, and sashes. Many Jews complied; however, some viewed these restrictions as an outright assault on Judaism.

The legacy of such religious restrictions can be seen in a contemporary context as well. Quebec's Bill 21, for example, which bans religious symbols including the wearing of *kippot*, and France's law 2004-2028 prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols, targeting the wearing of Muslim headscarves, enforce secularism. Like the Jews in Avignon, the Jews in twenty-first century France and Quebec have mixed responses to these bills; many have spoken out against the law, including Robert Calderisi who argues that this law is discriminatory. "We must reconnect with our long record of civility," he writes, "and recognize the nonsense of preventing devout Muslims – and Christians and Sikhs and Jews – from teaching in our schools or becoming a judge" (Calderisi). Some are more supportive, like Barbara Kay who purports in an article entitled "Why Jews Should Support Bill 21" that "Quebecers have no intention of becoming 'post nationalist'" (Kay). She states, "I don't call their melting-pot ideal racism; I call it tough love. I therefore support Bill 21" (Kay). There are Jews in Quebec and France who resist and challenge these prohibitions, as many have done in the past, and others who oblige; these choices influence the ways in which they connect with and see themselves as belonging within Judaism.

Twentieth century European Jews rebelled against their government edicts by swapping their old clothing, not for modern European suits, but rather for the styles preferred by Russian merchants, which actually resembled their own, now unlawful, Jewish costume (75).

Ironically, edicts demanding assimilation actually fostered a self-conscious sense of Jewishness, especially among educated and urban Jews who otherwise tethered their identity to modernist aspirations. Many Jews, too, responded to these revised dress codes by investing their garments with deep emotional and religious significance. Clothing

merely worn by Jews now became seen as traditional Jewish clothing, symbolizing traditional Jewish values. For example, the norm in modern male fashion is to button coats and shirts left over right. But Hasidic (Chassidic) men, like modern women, button right over left. These conventions undoubtedly arose through happenstance. Nonetheless, Hasidic men came to see their buttons as symbol[ic]. (Silverman 75)

“State-sponsored efforts to assimilate Jews,” Silverman argues, infused ordinary garments with religious import. Through this process of materialization, clothing became Jewish – “modernity tailored tradition,” as Silverman puts it (75). The anti-Semitic social perception of European culture, therefore, produced a system whereby counteridentification became an exceedingly important part of being a Jew. Hats evolved through time as a way for Jews to reject the dominant ideologies that surrounded them. As “Bad Subjects,” in the words of Muñoz, Jewish men used hats and clothing to disassociate from secular culture and to assert their independence. This remains the case today, as *Charedi* men distinguish themselves (in more ways than one) with designer Borsalino hats.

Orthodox men today assert their individuality within a highly regulated system by performing *dreidlich*. While Talmudic law governs almost all forms of male dress and coiffure (involving the donning of ritual objects, including *tefillin* (phylacteries, i.e., ritual black leather straps) *tzitzit* (a four-cornered garment with specially knotted fringes that men are required to wear), *payot* (sidelocks), facial hair, and others), religious men find ways to express themselves while disassociating with aspects the orthodox world that do not work for them. This chapter explores the many ways that orthodox men work within this Talmudic system of dress to engage with what they perceive to be their “authentic selves” and in some cases to engage even more with orthodoxy. In one case discussed in this chapter, an orthodox Jewish man from Brooklyn

uses his black hat and *tzitzit* as part of his stand-up comedy routine. In another, a man wears his *tzitzit* outside of his clothes and his *tefillin* outside of synagogue (both of which are considered unusual). These are the kinds of actions that I characterize as *dreidlich*.

### Setting the Stage: *Tzitzit* and *Shatnez*

The laws of ritual objects for men set the stage for *dreidlich*. Like *mikveh* and *chametz* rituals, the infrastructure of the laws reflects the performance practices it supports: it sets up a system that is necessarily impossible to enact exactly. It sets into motion a complex material choreography to swirl around and between highly specialized laws with an impossible abstraction of performance as its base. One of the most important vestimentary props for this choreography, outlined in the Talmud and in commentaries, are *tzitzit* (some women wear them as well, but according to traditional orthodoxy they are not required to). The Torah states, in Deuteronomy 22.12: “You shall make yourself twisted threads, on the four corners of your garments with which you cover yourself” (*Complete Tanakh*); and also in Numbers 15.38–40: “Speak to the children of Israel, and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations ... when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord to perform them” (*Complete Tanakh*). In Aryeh Kaplan’s instruction manual entitled *Tzitzith*, he interprets this text literally to mean that *tzitzit* serve as a reminder: “We bind them to our garments just as one might tie his string around his finger or belt in order to remember something” (2). In a sense, *tzitzit* serve to memorialize the entirety of the Torah. Just as sukkah practice stands in for the memory of the Jews’ nomadic wanderings in the desert, so wearing *tzitzit* stands in for a Sinai memory: a pivotal moment in Jewish history when, according to the Torah, some three million Jews heard the voice of God and were told the ten commandments. In Deuteronomy 4:9-13 Moses states,

Do not remove this memory from your heart all the days of your life... God spoke to you from the midst of the fire, you were hearing the sound of words, but you were not seeing a form... He told you of His covenant, instructing you to keep the Ten Commandments.

*(Complete Tanakh)*

To don *tzitzit* is to subscribe to the laws of the Torah in a holistic sense.

As late as the classical Greek period, standard garments, such as the *chiton* and the *himation* (rectangles of cloth that were draped and fastened around the body), were the norm. When these items were worn, the fringes were simply attached to them and the commandment of *tzitzit* was fulfilled. Jewish men in North America now wear a special four-cornered garment designed specifically for this purpose. This is called a *tallit katan*, consisting of a simple rectangle of cloth with a hole for the neck onto which the fringes are attached. “Since the *tallit katan* is always worn,” explains Kaplan, “the *mitzvah* [commandment] of *tzitzit* is one that is observed most constantly. It is the first commandment that we observe in the morning, and continues throughout the day. As such, it is a constant reminder of our obligation as Jews and of our allegiance to God (30). Kaplan is suggesting that the *tzitzit* commandment expands beyond a single action; it stands in for a larger commandment that is to be fulfilled on an ongoing basis.

Like the *mikveh* and the *chametz*, this performance practice circles around a very abstract goal, while never precisely pinning it down. Each of these three practices contains an event – at the *mikveh*, a woman immerses in water; during Passover, a *Seder* is enacted; and in this case, a human body dons *tzitzit*. Around and between and through these performance practices exists an ongoing ritual with no fixed beginning or end. When a Jewish man puts on *tzitzit* in the morning, he marks the beginning and also the end of an ongoing commandment to remember “[his] obligation as [a] Jew and ... [his] allegiance to God” (3). Understanding the choreography that

surrounds *tzitzit*, a complicated series of rituals pertaining to the laws of *shatnez*, can help to contextualize this vestimentary practice.

Symbolically, *shatnez* is important to understand as a framework for the mechanics of orthodox culture. Chapter three discussed the laws of *chametz* and their relationship to *Seder* ritual. *Chametz*, matzah's cosmic twin, is leavened bread; matzah, bread that is unleavened, is therefore significant because of what it is *not* rather than because of what it is. The identity of matzah is partially imaginary, as its purpose is largely to ghost or effigize that which is absent. This sets up a framework whereby the ritual act is foregrounded by its direct counterpart. *Tzitzit* functions similarly; it carries meaning inexplicably tied to the legislative context in which it is situated, the backdrop of which is a different ritual textile: wool and linen.

The laws of *shatnez*, amongst the most mysterious in the Torah, prohibit the permanent blending of wool and linen.<sup>21</sup> *Shatnez* is one of three Jewish laws characterized as *chukim* (decrees), which are a distinct category of laws that have no known rational reason. The *mitzvah* of the red heifer is the most famous example: in Temple times, those who had contact with the deceased could visit a holy priest, who would sprinkle the person with water containing the ashes of a red heifer, which would render them spiritually purified. *Chukim* can be logical (like some believe are the laws of *kashrut*), but do not have to be. *Shatnez* is therefore a law without reason.

Interestingly, the second mention of *tzitzit* (not one of the *chukim*) in the Torah directly follows the prohibition against wearing *shatnez*: “You shall not wear *Shatnez* (a mixture of) linen and wool together. [But] you shall make tassels on the four corners of your garments, with which you cover yourself (Deut. 22.11–12).” Ironically, wool and linen are the very fabrics woven

---

<sup>21</sup> The symbolic significance of wool is interesting when analyzed in the context of Jacob and Esau – specifically, how Jacob uses wool to pose as Esau, his hairy twin. A historical analysis of the symbolic parallel between Esau and Jacob and wool and linen is an interesting subject of investigation – one that I hope to take up in a future project.

together in the particular tassels that comprise *tzitzit*. How can this be? The simple answer, as stated in the Talmud (Menachot 39a; cf. Sanhedrin 89a), is that the fabrics are not *permanently* attached since a knot can be unwound. But that's too easy. The subtext(ile) of this contradiction is heftier. There is something both productive and complex about the *tzitzit* object as a problem a priori. It was conceived in sin, so to speak. Perhaps the duality of both fabrics represents an embracing of the contradiction.<sup>22</sup>

Let us examine the laws of *shatnez* that surround the *tzitzit* ritual. The Torah states: “You shall observe My decrees – you shall not mate your animal with another species, you shall not plant your field with mixed seed; and a garment that is a mixture of combined fibers shall not come upon you ...” (Lev. 19.19). *The Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah*, elaborates: “You shall not wear combined fibers, wool and linen together” (Kaplan 298). Until 1941, Jews were responsible for checking their garments independently. After World War II, Rabbi Yosef Rosenberger opened the first ever *shatnez* checking laboratory, with his organization *Torah U'Mitzvot* on Lee Avenue in Brooklyn.

Like *mikveh* and *chametz* rituals, *shatnez* choreography is passed down generationally through oral traditions and instruction manuals. How does one know if a garment contains linen? The only way to discern the *kashrut* of a piece of clothing is to examine the thread under a microscope and look for the markers; there are markers for linen and markers for wool, and one can discover whether there are both types of fibres in the suit. In other words, one relies on the human eye, unless the checker has suspicions, and then they use a microscope; in both scenarios, however, the human element always entails the possibility of error. Just as one cannot be

---

<sup>22</sup> As Sampson Raphael Hirsch suggests, “Only the priest had wool and flax mixed in his clothing, for he represents the community as a unity, and his personality bridges all dissimilarities (Fourth Law)” (qtd. in Hirsch 288).

absolutely sure that their home is *chametz* free for Passover, it is impossible to know with total certainty that a garment is *shatnez* free. Indeed, that isn't the point; it is the searching, the checking, the looking and the deliberating, that define the *shatnez* act. The ontology of *shatnez* is the looking, not the finding. There is a Hebrew term for this kind of intention: "*kavanah*," which means intention, sincere feeling, or direction of the heart, depending on the context. In seminary, I learned to pray with *kavanah*; I also learned that rituals, while valid on their own, are elevated to higher levels of spirituality when the performer has *kavanah*. Part of this concept is that the intention behind the ritual is of great spiritual importance (though does not determine its efficacy).

I acknowledge the exquisite care taken in detecting *shatnez* to emphasize the meticulousness with which items are examined and the extreme measures that are taken to observe the law. *Shatnez* is one example of the multiple legislative frameworks in orthodox Judaism that dictate the minutia of the quotidian. Whereas *shatnez* was at one time a ritual that individuals performed themselves, in modern times it is performed by a *shatnez* checker. Taking clothing to the *shatnez* checker is now the ritual that takes the place of the ritual the checker performs. The act of taking clothing to the checker has become the stand-in for labours of *shatnez* checking; accordingly, the donning of ritual objects like phylacteries and *tzitzit* is a stand-in for grander *mitzvot* comprised of complicated choreographies.

This space in between the performance and the law tells a story. Ritual choreographies are passed down generationally through the archive and the repertoire; accordingly, the space between became larger over time. If we are to look at the space between performance and the law as a stage for storytelling, then we are at a unique point in history because that platform has never been quite so large. In this way, *dreidlich* – the moving back and forth in the territory

between law and performance – is a distinctly contemporary practice.

This stage is a place where orthodox men can ‘play dreidel’ and mess around with the regulatory system of which they are a part. The grooming and vestimentary choices that orthodox men make – how to wear their skullcap, *tzitzit*, sidelocks – inform the stories they are telling others (and of course themselves) about their Jewishness, and are important clues in understanding the cultural nuances of orthodox Jewish life.

### Performing *Dreidlich*

Perhaps understanding clothing as a religious effigy begins with Althusser’s concept of ideology. “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” he posits. He argues that ideologies hail individuals, which in turn determine the people they become. He writes,

As a first formulation I shall say: *all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject ... I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (Althusser 18)

Arguably the first instance of Jewish ideological hailing occurs in the Bible in Genesis 22:1, when God “tests” Abraham, saying to him, “Abraham,” and Abraham says, “*Hineini*,” “Here I am” (*Complete Tanakh*). Althusser helps us understand the rituals of ideological recognition that underlie rituals like *tzitzit*: like a “hello” on the street, dress functions as a hailing mechanism and constitutes individuals as subjects. By dressing in a particular fashion, an individual is

subjected, part and parcel, to the ideology that “recruits” him.

The Jewish laws of dress, specifically for men, disrupt secular ideological recognition rituals by subverting normative vestimentary practices. Jewish dress participates in a uniquely Jewish ideology (and thus in its own process of materialization) and splits the seams of secular aesthetic practices precisely for the sake of its difference. Michel Pêcheux theorizes that “a ‘Good Subject’ chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms” and “‘Bad Subjects’ resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by the dominant ideology” (Muñoz 5). This rebellion counteridentifies by turning against the symbolic system of which it is a part (5).

Many orthodox Jews today are extremely proud of how their dress counteracts secular practice. In many circles it is considered shameful to dress secularly. The degree to which a person dresses orthodoxly corresponds to the degree to which he is accepted into mainstream orthodox culture, at least superficially. In his memoir *Foreskin’s Lament*, Shalom Auslander recalls the shame he felt as a young boy of having a father who didn’t always dress the part. He describes a particular incident in which his father did housework half dressed, when Ephraim, one of Sholom’s classmates, was visiting:

The good news was that my father was wearing his yarmulke. The bad news was that he wasn’t wearing his shirt. I could tell the kind of work my father was doing by his particular degree of undress: he could make it through the light projects – patching drywall, touching up paint – with both his shirt and yarmulke staying on ’til the end. For finish carpentry – trimming, staining, clamping, gluing – he’d probably ditch the shirt about halfway through. If the work became heavy – framing, casework, landscaping – the yarmulke was gone too. Over eighty-five degrees, he was down to his shorts and sandals ... I’d been to Ephraim’s

house dozens of times, and never once saw his father without his shirt on. I'd never seen him without his suit jacket on. One time his shoelace was untied, but that was an accident, and after he tied it, he told me what the Sages say about he who is so involved with his words of Torah that he forsakes his own appearance. It was something positive. (52)

The author is obviously embarrassed at his father's behaviour, for, in his eyes, being scantily clad signifies irreverence. The more his father undresses, the harsher the contrast between himself and Ephraim's father, a respected figure in the community. One of the many languages of identity in orthodox Jewish circles is dress, and distinctiveness is its primary dialect.

I interviewed ten men within the orthodox community in Toronto and ended up selecting three to focus on for my ethnography because they helped to show different approaches to practicing *dreidlich* through and in relation to vestimentary rituals. One approach uses traditional Jewish garb like *tzitzit* and *tefillin* in unconventional ways in order to draw new meaning from them; another blends traditional objects like *tzitzit* with modern clothes in an evolving negotiation of differentiation, and the third uses so-called secular trends like a tuxedo to intervene in a *Yeshivish* world. I knew all participants in advance of the interviews from the community, and solicited them via e-mail and in some cases in-person at community and social events, which is consistent with my solicitation of female participants. My initial criteria for interviews were men between the ages of 20 and 39, who live either in or around a quadrant of Toronto spanning from Eglinton to Sheppard Avenue; and who were either raised practicing Shabbat and *kashrut* or who have chosen to observe these rituals later in life. Beyond that, I selected male participants who were open-minded, my "ad-hoc" criterion which presupposed an openness to discussing taboo topics and an absence of negative judgment. I approached individuals that I knew relatively well, trusted, and felt were genuine and would speak honestly. Interviews were on average between two

and three hours. All names have been changed to pseudonyms. My methodological approach for the male participants is generally consistent with that for the female participants interviewed in other chapters; one key distinction is that the men in this study were unmarried at the time of their interviews and had no children. I made the choice to interview single men for this chapter because I sensed that married men would not feel comfortable being interviewed by an orthodox woman from their community about such personal matters.

I ultimately selected the material of interviewees who were aware of and spoke directly about their religious identifications, as well as having forged a relationship to Judaism in some way through the clothes they wore to highlight the vestimentary theme that this chapter explores. The three responses I include here are varied in that interviewees approach religious dress from their particular religious affiliations, families of origin, and geographic and cultural heritages, however they are unified in their return to pre-modern traditionalism in their disidentifications.

The three testimonies that follow are from men with their differing backgrounds. Yoav is a *Ba'al Teshuva* who works as a *mashgiach* (a Jew who supervises the *kashrut* status of a kosher establishment) at restaurants in Toronto, and spends his free time studying Torah at home and at the *Bais Midrash*. Aiden, also a *Ba'al Teshuva*, is a trained chef who moved to Toronto from Israel when he was twenty-two and started a kosher fine dining restaurant. Mendel was raised *Charedi*, went to law school in his twenties and has since established a career in real estate and development. One theme that connects the three interviewees is that they all moved between and around the very stringent and specific laws of dress they were prescribed by Talmudic law within tightly knit structures of religious commandment, and are ever-engaged in a process of negotiating identity and self-concept.

I was really interested in exploring the relationship between contemporary religious dress

and feelings of belonging and identification. I wanted to focus on the hyper-performance of vestimentary rituals for religious men, since they are so nuanced and specific. Like all the orthodox customs I analyse, I was interested in understanding how gendered laws in Judaism seem to compel their own transgression, and in so doing create meaningful platforms for individual expression. How might the nuances of religious garb play a role in how men view themselves, and how is the obsession with the details of “getting it exactly right” a recipe for productive failure, what I would later come to read as formative acts of disidentification? Therefore, I asked these men questions about their religious practice in relationship to their modes of dress. I wanted to know what these objects and clothes represented to them as part of their religious observance. What did dress accomplish culturally, religiously, socially, and personally for these men?

Yoav

Yoav is twenty-four years old and lives in a neighbourhood surrounding the Bathurst and Lawrence intersection at the time of this interview. We speak for two-and-a-half hours in the living room of his apartment, about his family and cultural background and his relationship to Judaism as expressed through the unique clothes he wears. Yoav shares with me that as an orthodox Jewish Black man he always stood out in the Jewish community, and even more so when he entered the orthodox community. His mother was born Jewish and his father was born Catholic, and his parents raised him as a secular Jew. Much of his religious practice he took on independently, based on independent learning and intensive Torah study with a rabbi he sought out. He states that he did not “fit in” to any of the various sections and subsections of the Toronto orthodox community. As someone who identifies as deeply spiritual, Yoav believes that a person’s soul is impacted by what he sees and thus can be discriminating about what and where he sets his gaze. His decisions around clothing and dressing Jewishly are connected to self-consciousness and perception – his

perceptions of others and others' perceptions of him:

I wear distinctly Jewish attire. It cannot be mistaken for any other ethnoreligious group. I wear a *tallit katan*, *tzitzit*, *payot* [sidelocks], a kippah. Sometimes I wear *tefillin* all day, but I don't do that regularly. It is a conscious decision to appear distinctly Jewish, and it is a conscious decision to not appear distinctly Jewish. (Yoav, Interview, February 2014)

Yoav also shares with me that he occasionally wears something he calls a *gamees*, commonly mistaken as a dress. "It's not a dress!" he jokes. "Well, it's a man dress." He continues,

It is important to me to be visibly Jewish. It is a conscious effort to wear a uniform. So, it (a) puts me in a position where I constantly need to act a certain way ... there are no days off. Ideally, it's supposed to be a representation of something. For instance, the same way a paramedic or a police officer wears a uniform ... people who aren't me know that I represent something...

Yoav takes the norms of orthodox dress to an extreme, using his conspicuous "uniform" to stand outside the norm. His *payot* are shoulder-length, he wears *tefillin* not only for prayer (as is customary) but in his everyday life outside of synagogue, and he wears a *gamees*. Yoav's personal uniform of orthodoxy lives outside the norm of this community, and it is in this place that he finds his religious conviction and his strength of character. His experience of being always "on," not ever having a day off, which holds him accountable for his actions, is what makes his garb meaningful. Yoav has taken many of the cultural norms that he learned when he was becoming orthodox and has adapted them in such a way that he created a new practice for himself, one that neither conforms to modern orthodoxy nor the *Yeshivish* community, but one that is distinctly his. He states,

I always wear my *tzitzit* out and long and not tucked like everyone else so that they can

do their job. So that I can see them and so other people can see them. To be constantly reminded of the obligations of ethical monotheism, no matter what direction I go.

Aiden

Aiden, is a *Ba'al Teshuva*, is thirty-four years old and lives in Toronto at the time of this interview. He is an Israeli-born entrepreneur and professional chef. Aiden invites me to his workspace located in downtown Toronto, and we speak for two hours about how his relationship to Jewish practice and culture has changed throughout the process of emigrating to Canada. Thirty-four years of age, Aiden was born and raised in a settlement near Haifa. He reflects on his journey toward orthodoxy as a Canadian immigrant. Having left Israel at the age of twenty-two, he spent two years in New York before moving to Toronto. Aiden created a career for himself in the kosher food industry. Like Yoav, Aiden chose to become observant later in life. He had no family in Canada to lean on, and he carved out his place in the community from scratch. Aiden also uses the word “uniform,” but for him it is used to fit in, not to stand out.

I was more trying to fit ... This is the army, and those are the uniforms. There is a certain way I wanted to be respected by others. I see now how different my perspective on things was when I was growing in Torah (i.e. becoming observant). I realize that my choices were made not from an honest place, but to fit. To be accepted. I felt I was penetrating into another group. I wanted to take part in it. It's like going to work, there is a certain type of dress code ... To keep this dress code would make me more suitable. (Aiden, Interview, March 2014)

Aiden states that the “uniform” was more about fitting in for him than it was about looking different from gentiles. “It helped me control how others would see me,” he says. As an emerging restaurateur, Aiden felt a need to establish himself and to be perceived as respectable.

“I didn’t want to seem like a ‘shmo.’ That was another element that affected my dressing this way. I was very involved in the community, which is why there was more weight on my head to look like a certain way.”

The language “weight on my head” speaks to a symbolic pressure that some of the men in this community experience: the socio-political and religious weight of a kippah, a black hat, a *shtrimmel* (fur hat), and other Jewish hats. The pressure that rests on Aiden’s head extends the legacy of the hat in Sholom Aleichem’s fictional Russian official to the large black fedora Menashe dons at the end of *Menashe*. Orthodox men sit at the head of the Shabbat table and head the performance of the Passover *Seder*. They use their heads in the *Bais Midrash* and wear phylacteries atop their heads in prayer. The head is the central site of the male Jewish body and the weight of that head causes the body to turn and shift from side to side like a spinning top. I once again return to the words of Ben Bag-Bag: “Turn it over, turn it over, for everything is contained [in the Torah]” (Avot 5:26).

Aiden shares with me his complicated, Althusserian logic for choosing to dress the way he did:

When I dress like everybody and stand there between everybody, I realize that it only makes a difference for someone else that comes in [who] is not like everybody. Because whoever dresses like everybody just dresses like everybody. It’s only when another person comes in [who] is not like everyone that they will see that I am like everyone and he is not. It only becomes something obvious [when seen by] someone else. So, I did feel very different. I did feel very different when I was wearing those clothes. I felt like everyone. I became, like, another drop of water in the sea. And I wanted to be. I wanted to be, like, another goose, like everyone.

The first time Aiden speaks about difference, he is referring to distinctiveness: the moment when an outside observer comes into contact with the homogeneity of orthodox Jewish dress. The second time he speaks about difference – when he states, “So, I did feel very different,” he seems to be articulating feelings of accomplishment: the pride of passing, of finally “making it.” Aiden later shares with me that, since then, his outlook has evolved:

One rabbi told me a couple of years ago that if I’m going to succeed I have to stay authentic. I wasn’t raised religious; I wasn’t raised with the values, so to try to behave as what I am not is the wrong perspective. Today it’s only between me and God. There is no more outside world; there is only inside world.

Aiden uses his mode of dress to negotiate an internal relationship between himself and God. His choice to wear his own clothes, to turn away from the “uniform,” established for himself a sense of authenticity.

Then I realized that there is much more to this idea: there was action. The action of bringing my clothes to check for *shatnez*, of saying *shehechyanu* [blessings on newly acquired objects or experiences, like new clothes] – and these actions are hidden. Like, the *shatnez* note is on the inside of your coat, not the outside. Even *tzitzit* ... I remember my *Rebbe* [Rabbi] once told me, “You wear your *tzitzit* in, because it’s between you and God.”

Yoav wears his *tzitzit* ‘out’ (outside of his clothes, i.e. visible) and Aiden wears his *tzitzit* ‘in’ (tucked into his pants, i.e. invisible); there are *halachic* opinions supporting both approaches.

Both Yoav and Aiden find meaning and faith in choosing how to wear the *tzitzit*. It is the turning in and around the laws of *tzitzit* that allow for subjectivities (and authenticities) to emerge and for a way to approach the law from a personal, intentional manner – to have *kavanah*. Aiden speaks

about the role of action in his faith – the doings of Judaism, like *shatnez* and *tzitzit* – the action of performing commandments, that help him to establish a sense of faith.

The idea of action as a Jewish identificatory response is taken up by Simcha Prombaum in his article, “Hineini: ‘Here I Am’ and ‘I Am Here’ are Different.” Prombaum argues that while the biblical terms “*hineini*,” “here I am” and “*hi’nih’ni*,” “I am here,” “apparently mean the same thing... [they] do not.” He posits that *hineini* is stated biblically as a response to a call, whereas *hi’nih’ni* is always followed by a verb, which connotes an intention to perform an action.

While Prombaum characterizes these actions as *mitzvot*, I wonder if his definition can be broadened to include other modes of action. Perhaps *dreidlich* is a way of stating *hi’nih’ni* – a subtle subversion of *hineini*, but a submission to ideology still. By *interpreting* the law and performing religious acts according to those interpretations, Jewish men are disidentifying via performance, doing *dreidlich*: they are deciding to wear or not to wear, to do in this way or that, spinning from one *halachic* directive to the next and landing on what feels authentic to them.

At first when I started wearing *tzitzit* I was excited and I wanted to show the world I was wearing them. It took me time to humble this concept. I think that was one of the moments that most made me think about how I was dressed. Of course there are different *halachas*, but this is what worked for me. (Aiden)

Aiden moved in and out of the differing opinions on how to wear *tzitzit* and how to dress more generally and landed on one that he described as “what worked for me.”

Mendel

Mendel is thirty-two years old and lives in Toronto at the time of this interview. He was raised in an extremely religious household on a street in the centre of ‘the *cholent* pot.’ Mendel possesses a law degree but has chosen not to practice law; instead, he works in real estate and property

development. He requests that we meet in a public park near his house, which we do, and subsequently speak for two hours, seated at a picnic table. Mendel was raised in a *Charedi* household and belonged to one of the strictest orthodox synagogues in Toronto. Growing up, he attended traditional orthodox schools for boys and focussed primarily on Torah and Talmud study at home.

Mendel spoke about a herd mentality, similar to that described by Aiden, a sentiment that echoed Rabbi Feigenbaum's emphatic distress at "billboard" Judaism (see p.27):

I grew up very rigidly orthodox and rigid in practice for most of my life. When I was in high school I wore a black hat and *tzitzit* and *tefillin* every day. It was a way of life. This mode of dress is based on a rule system and is not necessarily tied to general exposure at large. You wore a white shirt, black pants, just because that's what the school did.

(Interview, July 2014)

Mendel began to practice his own version of Judaism as the years passed. He veered in and out of orthodox law, contesting cultural codes, specifically modes of dress, from within its tightly knit structure. He challenged the *Yeshivish* stream of orthodoxy that he was presented with growing up but did not outright reject it:

If I go to an orthodox wedding, I am going to wear ... there's a margin that's considered orthodox dress. I don't know a single person in my *shul* (synagogue) growing up who wore a tuxedo. Again, there's nothing in *halacha* that's mandated about this, but when you have a tight knit culture, the ideas become very mainstream. The simplest behaviours, like wearing a tuxedo and bow tie, are just not adopted. It would be considered strange. But I would do it; I would wear a tuxedo.

Mendel shares with me that, as a spiritual person, he reflects on his childhood experiences with a

kind of detachment, neither emotional nor apathetic. Having attended the strictest *cheiders* (boys schools) as a child, and *yeshivas* as a teenager and young adult, he knows how it feels to dress the part and how it feels to be visibly orthodox.

You're always perceived as Jewish. That's your life. You want to be perceived as Jewish. Part of what is taught to you is the difference and separation of outside culture. I don't do it now; I'm relishing the anonymity ... But I do think it's important. I think it's important that Jews are proud and identifiable. Now it's hard to say how identifiable they should be in terms of dress ... But it should be known.

Mendel has a sense of pride around his Jewish dress, something that is deeply instilled in him. While he questions much of the ideology of his upbringing, he has not rejected it. Mendel chooses to remain orthodox despite – or amidst – his questions.

A lot of my life I just don't identify with. I am the consummate progressive. I'm out to find and realize on a high possible form. I believe the whole behavioural system [of orthodoxy] is based on internal struggle. The way you respond to it shapes you and forms you in a certain way. But if it's not you, it's a peel. I believe we have a place where we're extremely comfortable, we have a soul.

A loaded statement. I interpret Mendel's first words, "A lot of my life I just don't identify with" as an allusion to the "peel" he mentions later. He did not identify with the costume he was given as a young man, a *yeshiva bachor*, and transformed it into the dress of a progressive, a truth-seeker. He believed, as I do, that the whole behavioural system is based on internal struggle. Mendel's doings of *dreidlich* includes wearing a tuxedo to a community wedding; this is one expression of how he spins Talmudic law through his identity as a "consummate progressive." I believe it is in the midst of this internal struggle that he found his place of comfort, his soul.

I wonder what it means to be a consummate progressive in the *Yeshivish* world in which Mendel was raised and still resides, and how it relates to the statement, “a lot of my life I just don’t identify with.” I believe *dreidlich* can be progressive because it creates new possibilities for performing orthodoxy and self-expression, and inspires people to think differently about their Jewishness. It expands the orthodox box, creating room for individuality and difference. Men in this community do *dreidlich* to survive in the orthodox world, as a way of dealing with an incongruity between societal expectation and personal freedom. It is a way of negotiating power structures. But it is also a way to make the Torah personal, from mooing like a cow to wearing a tuxedo and everything in between. It is, like Luzer suggests, finding creative ways to work with and around the law, to make the Torah their own.

#### To Assimilate and Self-Protect

The problem with the story that began this chapter is that, as the rattlebrained Jew understood it, the peasant got it wrong. He didn’t recognize the Jew and woke the other man instead. So, too, history has woken the other man. After World War II, for example, Zionism didn’t accept the image of the Jew – he was meek and effeminate and submissive – so it woke the Aryan instead, but under the name of the Jew. In his essay, “Contested Masculinities,” Eran Shor argues that the perception of Jewish men as passive originated in the second century after the failure of the Bar Kochba Rebellion (3). Efforts were made by Rabbinic culture to erase flashbacks to this rebellion by embedding Jewish warrior myths in the national memory. What replaced these images was that of a soft, timid, studious Talmud scholar – basically, Jacob – the exact opposite of the dominant Esau hero of romantic European culture. So, by the end of the nineteenth century, this new model of masculinity, the ideal of the gentle Jew, began to break down. Prominent leaders of the European Zionist movement such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau

attempted to create a new paradigm for Jewish masculinity that conformed more to more European standards of manliness. Historian Daniel Boyarin argues that, in their view, only leaving Europe and establishing a Jewish state could rescue Jewish masculinity and restore the “national erection” (277). The Zionist all-stars set out to sculpt a muscular Jew, inspired mainly by Nazi imagery, with a belligerent Jewish spirit to match. “While traditional Diaspora Jewish culture had little interest in ancient Jewish warriors and military figures,” such as Samson, Shor contends, or the Maccabees and the rebels of Masada, “the Zionist Jews enthusiastically adopted all these as icons” (4).

The irony of the short story is, of course, that it was the Jew and no other who asked the peasant to wake him in the first place, hailing him to board the train of a secular ideology. Indeed, such was the case for key European Zionist figures of the nineteenth century as well as those that followed in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as David Raziell and Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who helped to establish the image of the Sabra (Israel-born): tall, muscular, sturdy, and ready to fight – everything that the Diaspora Jew failed to be (Shor).

In *Unheroic Conduct*, D. Boyarin traces the genealogy of the *Edelkayt* (literally, “nobility,” but in Yiddish, “gentleness and delicacy”) Jew, making an argument that there is something correct, though seriously undervalued, in the European misrepresentation of the Jewish man as a sort of woman. “More than just an anti-Semitic stereotype, the Jewish ideal male as countertype to ‘manliness’ is an assertive historical product of Jewish culture” (4). Boyarin claims that Freud was a prime example of this epiphenomenon and reflects on the Jewish *shtrimmel* that adorned the head of Freud’s father. As outlined earlier, the semiotics of the Jewish hat are complex (see also the interview with Aiden), as hats have historically been used both oppressively, hegemonically, and also liberally. D. Boyarin describes Freud’s father as a

“big, strong man” who behaved in a manner experienced by Freud as shameful. “The hat [*shtrimmel*] was certainly for him a symbol of the phallus ... whether or not it is ‘true’ that the hat symbolizes male genitalia, for Freud it was certainly the case” (34). This was the pervasive image of the Jewish man by the turn of the century: large, authoritarian men, with tall, erect, fur hats. He was a warrior, a hunter, and a scholar, all at once.

Let us return to the scene Auslander describes in his memoir, when he experienced shame and humiliation at the sight of his hypermasculine father, large and strong and handy – the flip side of the *Edelkayt*. Both scenarios belong to the legacy of Jewish men’s rejecting patriarchal models of traditional masculinity in favour of alternative masculinities. Auslander’s shame effigizes Jacob’s deviation from Esau’s warrior persona. As a member of an orthodox community in Toronto, I observe the pendulum swinging back and forth in the *Yeshivish* world, from *Edelkayt* to warrior, from Jacob to Esau. I see men draw elements from one or the other, depending on the circumstance. One male friend of mine who is *Yeshivish* started a small business in his twenties doing flower arrangements for orthodox families, which deviated from the norm for men in his community either to go to university or learn a trade (not flowers), and study Torah. He made a decision to pursue his more ‘feminized’ passion, despite being stigmatized; however, he shared with me that he could never fully commit to the business because he was worried about what it would say about him – that people might perceive him as effeminate or gay.<sup>23</sup> When women in the community approached him with larger scale gigs, he insisted that this was only a hobby, a side hustle, and then pursued a degree in marketing.

Historically, men have moved back and forth from Jacob to Esau from one decade to

---

<sup>23</sup> Since queerness in the orthodox community in Toronto is not recognized on an institutional level, and the queer orthodox community is virtually invisible, to my knowledge, with only a small number of self-identified gay orthodox men and women in the city, it is extremely difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals in the orthodox community to come out, which means, tragically, that they remain in hiding.

another, but individually, men make that movement from one moment to the next. The repertoire for Jewish masculinity seems to be a Beckettian hat routine on repeat; he puts on the hat, he takes off the hat; he puts on the hat, he takes off the hat. *Dreidlich* is sometimes practiced as a reaction against pressures to perform hypermasculinity. One *Charedi* man in I know wears his *tzitzit* exposed (untucked) to his secular workplace and grows a moustache for Movember; both of these practices are disidentificatory but in opposite ways. Another young man I know wears steel-toe rainbow sneakers to his high school, despite their conspicuousness at his orthodox *yeshiva*. These actions might seem miniscule, but as someone who is part of the orthodox world, I recognize their significance as micro-assertions of *dreidlich* to be sure. These acts work against a concept of the hockey playing, sukkah-building contemporary *Yeshivish* man, whose purpose is to provide and protect. This is the latest version of the hat trick.

Stand-up comedian David Finkelstein has his own rendition of the trick, beautifully illustrated in the short film, *A Jew Walks into a Bar* (2016), produced by *Lucky 9 Films* and *Fancy Squid Productions*. Finkelstein, an orthodox Jew belonging to a secluded Brooklyn sect, opens his first act in the film at the Broadway Comedy Club with the words, “Ever feel like you’re in the wrong place?” (Miller 1:10). The audience laughs, and he continues the bit: “I feel like you guys don’t appreciate how cool I am. Take my hat, for example; the brim is supposed to be bent *down*, but I’m wearing it bent *up*. I fight the system” (1:15-1:30). Funny and true, this joke speaks to the microcosmic nuances of “fighting the system” in the Chassidic world. The slightest tip of a hat is, in his reality, a meaningful subversion without being transgressive.

Finkelstein insists: “I’m not doing [comedy] to rebel, that’s the thing. I’m not, like, oh, I want to stop being religious...I want to do comedy. My goal is to do both” (3:02). Finkelstein overtly goes against the norms of his family and community; they do not condone comedy

because of the possibility of being influenced by secularism and by non-orthodox Jews, and due to the prevalence of improper speech in this genre. Finkelstein even goes as far as to compare practicing comedy to using heroin, insofar as his family would view both acts as equally self-destructive.

However, Finkelstien does not reject orthodox law and customs. In fact, he upholds them. He does not perform on Shabbat and he often wears religious garb. In one show, Finkelstein wears new clothes – jeans and a sweater – and he still wears a yarmulke and *tzitzit*. He shows off his new threads to his friends (other comedians) before going onstage, and they respond with questions:

FRIEND: You're still wearing your weird underwear, right? [points to *tzitzit*]

FINKELSTEIN: Oh this... I have to. This is a law.

FRIEND: What does [it] represent?

FINKELSTEIN: This is actually a bulletproof vest...

FRIEND: [refers to jeans] So you're breaking major rules right now?

FINKELSTIEN: It's not really rules... it's more of a grey area. (16:30-16:50)

Finkelstein's statement is true; in fact, his actions are in alignment with "the rules" (yarmulke and *tzitzit*). It is within the grey area that he is choosing to push the envelope. When Finkelstein calls his *tzitzit* a "bulletproof vest," he is obviously kidding, but like the hat bit from his opening act, the joke rings true. He can bend the rules all he wants; as long as he's wearing the bulletproof vest, he's still in the game. His actions aren't "off the *derech*" (a colloquialism referring to being off the orthodox path); they're *dreidlich*.

In one of Finkelstein's acts he states, "I'm not allowed to touch a girl. Do you know that?" to which an audience member responds, "Yeah? How's that going?" Finkelstein volleys

back, “Doing great... it’s why I’m here!” (9:18). Finkelstein seems to be using comedy as a way of managing and working through the restrictiveness of orthodoxy. In doing so, he thrives creatively. Orthodox law does not permit him to touch a woman; pursuing comedy, on the other hand, while culturally unacceptable, does not (necessarily) transgress Jewish commandment. He bends, but he does not break. Finkelstein’s comedy, paradoxically, gives him a way to enjoy his orthodoxy, echoing the *dreidlich* choreographies of the interviewees above.

*Dreidlich* can also be seen in the work of Moshe Kopstick, an orthodox Jewish Torontonionan YouTuber. Kopstick, owner of Revaya Productions, produces videos under the username “KOPSHTICK” that do just that (*shtick*) but also do more. In one of his more controversial videos produced in 2016, “Chanukah Rock Singalong,” Kopstick sings a song he composed about Chanukah to the tune of “Jingle Bell Rock.” In the first frame, Kopstick has his back to the camera, rocking his hips side to side to the beat of the music and then coyly turns his head to face the camera in the classic “Santa’s Helper” stance, raising his eyebrows suggestively. For the next 60 seconds or so, the video is fairly wholesome, detailing the various Chanukah rituals, including Chanukah synagogue, menorah lighting, and parties. He sings, “At the nighttime it’s the right time – to set those candles ablaze... We will ca-rol about the mi-ra-cle – that one drop of oil lasted eight whole days” (0:48) and continues in a similarly vanilla fashion until about half-way into the video when he pauses the song for an interlude. “It’s that time of year again, folks,” he says in the tone of a game-show host, “time to dust off that menorah, get the family together – yes, even Uncle Shlomo – and party for eight days of presents! I know what *I* want this year...” (1:17). At this point the shot fades into a fantasy where Kopstick is seen swinging in slow motion from a large wrecking ball, obviously reminiscent of Miley Cyrus’ famous “Wrecking Ball” video (released in 2013) with Kopstick stripped down to a white shirt,

boxers and *tzitzit*.<sup>24</sup> He also dons a black fedora and classic *yeshivish*-looking dress shoes and socks. Cyrus' song "Wrecking Ball" sounds in electric guitar in the background (1:30). After about fifteen seconds of this fantasy interlude, Kopstick returns to his rendition of "Jingle Bell Rock," only this time his lyrics are slightly more provocative. He sings, "Grab a dreidel, toss it up, give it a twirl – spin it around the world: Israel, America, Saudi Arab... oh wait, maybe not that last place" (2:08), and then concludes with "That's the Chanukah Rock!" (2:17).

Anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin (Daniel Boyarin's brother) has his own take on the orthodox hat trick, his personal Estragon-ian moment. In his book, *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul*, he describes his ambivalence toward eating at restaurants that are not strictly kosher:

I have been willing to go to nonkosher restaurants and simply avoid ... meat and shellfish. In New York, I will not do so while wearing a Jewishly marked head covering; in other, less "Jewish" cities, such as the university towns where I've worked the last few years, I have fewer compunctions. Once, about a decade ago, I had lunch with a distant relative at a modest restaurant in downtown New Haven and left my kippa on. "Don't you feel funny eating here with a kippa on your head?" she asked. "If I go here with my husband, he always takes his off first." I told her I do feel funny about it – but I feel funny uncovering my head as I walk into a restaurant, too. (54)

This is reminiscent of scenes of discomfort in *Unorthodox*. Here, Yanky travels to Germany with his rebellious and violent cousin Moishe (classic Jacob/Esau dichotomy) on a search for Esty.

After landing in Berlin, Moishe expresses discomfort with being so visibly Jewish. He notes the irony of their conspicuous Chassidic attire in this particular locale:

---

<sup>24</sup> I know Moshe Kopstick personally from the community, and he shared with me that he actually lost his job teaching at one of the Toronto boys *cheders* for posting this video, and for this scene specifically. He told me that when the video was released he was given an ultimatum by the administration: to take down the video (or simply cut that scene) and keep his job, or the reverse. He chose the video.

MOISHE: What did you bring your *shtreimel* [fur hat] for? So everyone can admire how Jewish we look? Just put on a yellow star, why don't you.

YANKY: We brought *shtreimels* to Europe when we came with Daddy...

MOISHE: This isn't Antwerp, Yanky. This isn't even London. This is Berlin, the capital of Germany! Look around... (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 8:15-8:45, "Part 2")

Vestimentary themes are further expounded a few scenes later, when the cousins arrive at their hotel and are stereotyped by the concierge, presumably because of their religious garb. "It's always a great pleasure to host guests from Israel here in Germany," he says. "Shalom!" to which Moishe retorts, "Israel? Zionists?<sup>25</sup> We're from *New York*. The United States of America" (12:30-13:05). (They change into baseball caps shortly thereafter.)

There is no easy answer when it comes to dress for orthodox men. Their Jewishness is marked explicitly by their distinctively Jewish head coverings, the donning of which always ushers forth the question of a Judeo-gendered identity: Do I want to be a Jewish man today? Or, more precisely, do I want to identify publicly as a Jewish man in this scenario? These questions emerge from the doings of *dreidlich*, the negotiating of male vestimentary laws in motion. Accordingly, the kippah is a central site of performativity; J. Boyarin opted to identify as Jewish, despite the tacit judgement he might receive as a result. The alternative, presumably, felt inauthentic.

Thus, mapped onto the male, Jewish body are multiple, inter-woven narratives around Jewish masculinity as represented by the various ritual objects and garments Jewish men are instructed to wear. Jewish dress is a performance act – that is, the *tefillin*, *tzitzit*, and hat-wearing of Jewish men; behind these performances, exists the backdrop of *shatnez*, which involves a

---

<sup>25</sup> Many *Chassidim* and *Charedim* are vehemently anti-Zionist.

series of complicated choreographies that foreground religious commandments. Between and around and through the discursive, vestimentary performance practices of Jewish men is a legislative context that impacts, and indeed defines, their ritual efficacy. In coming to grips with this larger context, we can better understand how orthodox men in Toronto experience masculinity vis-à-vis the legacies of history and the concerns of the current moment. The complexities of these vestimentary choreographies limit and also expand social, cultural, and spiritual opportunities for orthodox men, and in doing so, construct a masculine performance practice, doing *dreidlich*. Like Shalom Shachnah, the orthodox man strives endlessly to reach a Jewish destination, but he never arrives. The journey between prescription and enactment, between societal expectation and self-expression, is paradoxical. *Dreidlich* is a cunning, rebellious performance of the in-between, a way for religious men to re-imagine their orthodoxy, to make it personal and idiosyncratic, and to question the very construct of a destination.

## Chapter Five: The *Shidduch* Crisis: Marriage and Failure in Orthodox Toronto

There is a famous Jewish midrash on the book of Exodus about a man named Nachshon Ben Aminadav (*Complete Tanakh*). The story goes that when the Israelites finally reached the Red Sea, it did not immediately part. While they stood at the banks in despair, Nachshon Ben Aminadav entered the water alone. It is said that it was only once the waters were up to his nose that the sea parted. This midrash is a lesson in what the orthodox call “*emunah*” (pure faith). Later, Miriam and other women will dance with tambourines they brought from Egypt, another act of *emunah* (Exodus 15:20, *Complete Tanakh*). But before God reveals Himself by parting the sea, only Nachshon dares to immerse in its waters.

*Emunah* is a popular term for something much studied in contemporary orthodox culture, and there are many definitions. Over the course of my own Torah study, I have come to understand it to mean a profound, active trust in God’s plan, which includes letting go of the idea that I am in control of the outcome of my actions. It is the conviction that, if I believe wholly and strongly that I am acting according to God’s will, then, whatever the outcome, it is right (even if it feels wrong) and is part of His master plan. Nachshon believed so strongly in God’s will that when He commanded that the Israelites enter the water, Nachshon did so wholeheartedly. His *emunah* was strong enough that he could face the likelihood of drowning. This biblical story is reminiscent of the famous sacrifice of Issac, when God commands Abraham to slaughter his son. Abraham, stretched forth with knife in hand, says, “*Hineini*,” but an angel stops him at the very last moment (Genesis 22:10-11, *Complete Tanakh*). Nachshon and Abraham, and many of those who share their faith, believe that people ought to be brave enough to withstand the fear and uncertainty that often comes when you are obeying God’s commandments and behaving in

service of His will. Kierkegaard calls this state of elevated consciousness “fear and trembling” (1).

I thought of Nachshon ben Aminadav when viewing Rama Burshtein’s film, *The Wedding Plan*, which addresses, among other things, Jewish concepts of love, marriage, matchmaking, and faith. Michal, a thirty-one-year-old *Ba’alat Teshuva* (a Jewish woman from a secular background who becomes orthodox) living in Jerusalem, is finally engaged to be married when her fiancé suddenly calls off the wedding. Unwilling to return to the orthodox dating scene (termed internally as the “*shidduch*” [matchmaking] scene; also known as “*shidduchim*”), Michal follows the advice of her sister to, after ten years of dating – 490 hours and 123 men, to be exact (she does the math) – “just quit” (14:32). Accordingly, she proceeds to prepare for her wedding to take place on the eighth night of Chanukah, despite the fact that she has no groom. When she is booking the venue, Shimi, the owner of the wedding hall confronts her:

SHIMI: The eighth night of Channukah?

MICHAL: Yes, 22 days from now.

SHIMI: You’re a character, Michal.

MICHAL: So I am.

SHIMI: I just hope you’re not going crazy on me.

MICHAL: I’m not crazy.

SHIMI: Really?

MICHAL: I’m getting married on the eighth night of Chanukah.

SHIMI: But who is the groom?

MICHAL: I have a hall. I have a dress. The apartment is almost ready. It’s a small task for God to find me a groom by the end of Chanukah. (21:20)

There is a logic to Michal's formulation, as rabbinic commentary states that it is as easy for God to make a match as it was for Him to split the Red Sea. It is Michal's conviction that if she does her part to believe in God's plan with a full heart, then God will do His in parting the Red Sea, or in this case, in taking care of her match. She states, "I believe that if I'm 100% sure that God will find me [a groom], He will" (22:53)... I just need to find the courage. That's all I lack" (23:40). Michal is criticised by those around her. The community rabbi claims it is "not the Jewish way" nor is it the "way of our community" – that what she is doing is "counting on miracles," which is against the law (35:44). Michal challenges his claims: "I'm not demanding anything of God," she rebuts, "I only demand of *myself* the courage to believe in His plan" (my emphasis) (36:05). In Michal's view, she is not transgressing orthodoxy but simply practicing *emunah*; by planning her wedding with perfect faith, her marriage (and God's will) will follow. "My wedding plan is like a karate chop," she explains. "If I focus 100%, I'll break through the wall. At 99%, I'll break my hand" (36:25). Her plan will only work if she, like Nachshon, immerses in the water – the figurative *mikveh* of her wedding plan – as deep as her nose.

Michal arrives at this point in her life after ten years of searching for her match and failing, culminating in the ultimate failure of her broken engagement. At one point in the film, she is on a *shidduch* date with a man who is deaf, a match she had previously rejected. At dinner, when the man asks her (through his translator) what possessed her to change her mind, she (insensitively) replies, "despair" (34:34).

In the first scene of the film, we see Michal's despair, when she meets with a woman in her community who specializes in helping singles. She is not a matchmaker per se (nor is she a "fortune teller," as is stated on the Wikipedia page for the film) but rather a spiritual agent for matches – a cross between a healer and a therapist. I visited several of these 'professionals'

myself when I was a twenty-something living in Jerusalem. Their goal was to help me “clear the blocks” so that I might become more open to my match. “What do you want?” the woman in the film asks Michal.

MICHAL: To get married.

WOMAN: Don't lie.

MICHAL: What?

WOMAN: Don't be a joker.

MICHAL: I don't want to be alone.

WOMAN: That's not what I asked. What do you want?

MICHAL: Love. I want love.

WOMAN: What else?

MICHAL: To please God.

WOMAN: Cut it out. If you can't tell the truth, how can we clear the obstacles?

MICHAL: I want ... I want to be normal.

WOMAN: Yes ...

MICHAL: I want to be respected. I want people to respect me because I have a spouse.

I'm sick of feeling humiliated.

WOMAN: Yes.

MICHAL: I want to invite people for Shabbat, I'm sick of being invited! I want to make

Shabbat with a man. I don't want to be alone anymore. I want someone to sing to

me. I'm sick of being handicapped!

WOMAN: Of course! I know!

MICHAL: I want stability and I want to live. I want to give and I want to receive. I want to love and I want to be loved back. (6:03)

As the writer and director of this film, Burshtein does a great job articulating the struggle of unmarried orthodox women in Jerusalem and beyond. Michal uses the Hebrew word “*nacha*” (crassly translated in the subtitles as “handicapped”) in her speech. Interestingly, the etymology of the word *nacha* is related to the word “*lehakor*” to strike (which is arguably where the translation of “handicapped” comes from – being “stricken” with a certain state). Michal feels stricken with the disease of singleness and she refuses to play the victim.<sup>26</sup>

I began this dissertation with a discussion of Burshtein’s first film, *Fill the Void*, about a young woman who is pressured to marry her brother-in-law after her sister’s death so that she can fill in as a mother to her infant nephew. It seems appropriate that now, to conclude my dissertation, I discuss her second film, which addresses another dimension of “filling in”: the pressures that orthodox singles feel to compensate for their unmarried status. This compensation takes shape in the form of doings – doings that attempt to redress their failures to become married and in fact create new spiritual spheres and frontiers for faith. The character of Michal, as well as the various living characters in the pages that follow, literally embodies the journey of a special failure of the highest order, the failure to marry and be recognized culturally as a ‘full Jew.’ These women, however, play a double role in *frum* society – they are failures, but they are

---

<sup>26</sup> It seems intentional that Burshtein chose to place Michal on a date with a deaf man later in the film, previously referenced. There is perhaps a kind of ableism at play in the framing of being single as a disease and the grouping together of disabled bodies. In Burshtein’s first film, *Fill the Void*, Freida, a single woman in her thirties, watches her younger sister find a match. Freida bonds with Shira’s Aunt Hanna who appears to be in her sixties and has no arms. During Freida’s sister’s engagement party, Aunt Hanna asks Freida, “How is it that none of the bachelors have grabbed a diamond like you?” to which Freida responds, “They don’t think I’m a diamond” (30:37). It is then revealed that Aunt Hanna never married either, and only wears a headscarf so that “people won’t ask questions” (31:08). The grouping together of singleness and being disabled happens again on Michal’s date.

also leaders. They are stigmatized, but, interestingly, they are also respected. Many have been discriminated against for official leadership and have consequently chosen to carve out their own teaching positions and publication opportunities, which are often very well received. One of my interviewees, Libby, started a blog with a readership of hundreds. Another began teaching a Torah class in a friend's basement apartment. These are figures who enact fully the negotiation between law and performance that is the subject of this dissertation: they have found exemplary ways to be orthodox in spite and because of their literal failure to marry.

The paradox is in the freedom to choose that failure facilitates. Michal's failure to marry gives her the opportunity to choose to have faith anyway. It was Nachshon's belief in God "in spite of" that made him a hero. More specifically, it was his willingness to ignore what seemed the obvious outcome of his actions and to act, despite that probable result, in accordance with God's commandment that made him a leader.

Michal finds freedom in rituals. She books a hall and a caterer, prepares her apartment, buys a wedding dress, all in spite of the very real circumstances of her single life. This isn't counteridentification – that is, engaging in reactive behaviours such as rejecting the pressures to marry and essentially giving her community the figurative finger. Instead, she disidentifies. Michal plays the game – she plays it too well, in fact – and it is that choice that empowers her. The women I interviewed for this chapter shared this sense of empowerment: they were strengthened by their doings and made "whole" in a cultural context where they were made to feel mere fragments of a Jew.

Yes, these acts were about faith, but for some of these women, specifically those whose marriages ended, they were also about recuperating their roles as Jewish women. I now return to my original research question of what failure means from the viewpoint of Jewish identity,

specifically as it relates to my own journey, having been married and divorced, and the journeys of others, through orthodox dating, marriage, and divorce. As I stated in my introduction, I spent ten years of my life trying and ‘failing’ to get married, and as I reflect on those years I attempt to understand what was really going on. When I started writing this chapter, I intended to investigate the problems with *shidduch* culture; what ended up being my focus, however, through formal interviews as well as my own observation of and participation in this system, was how *divorce* in an orthodox context factors into the equation. I witnessed and spoke to orthodox women who *shidduch*-dated, got married, got divorced, and then *returned* to these channels. In the midst of this research, I became one of these women. *I* got divorced and returned to these channels, and around me I saw and was moved by my peers’ change in mentalities – how they were establishing multidimensional viewpoints for their lives through creative and sometimes disidentificatory outlets. They were engaging with, not against, their marginalization. This research transformed me as an orthodox woman on my own journey, and it compelled me to think critically about Jewish divorce as a central site of performativity.

### Marriage and Divorce in Jewish Law

Married women are assigned many rituals in orthodoxy – chief among them are the laws of *niddah* and the laws of *kashrut* and Pesach cleaning, discussed at length earlier. Single women, conversely, are not. It has been my observation that these women choose to find new actions when their previous ones are no longer expected of them (a painful reality for divorced women). All Jewish rituals are detailed and complex – as Esty aptly remarks in *Unorthodox*, “Where I come from there are many rules” (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 10:15, “Part 2”) – and the Jewish laws of marriage and divorce are no exception. According to orthodox law, three *halachic* milestones need to take place in order for Jewish marriage to occur: *erusin*, the

betrothal or engagement, *kiddushin*, which is determined by sexual relations as well as the exchanging of money and documents, and *nissu'in*, a marriage ceremony under a *chuppah*. According to orthodoxy, Jewish marriage is *halachically* valid if these steps are carried out between a man and a woman who are both Jewish. A later regulation required that a *minyan* (quorum) of ten men be present at the wedding ceremony (Sherman 2).

Both husband and wife have obligations toward each other in Jewish marriage; the question of “acquisition” in *kiddushin*, however, is highly contentious. The *kiddushin* act permits a woman to be married to and intimate with her husband after *nissu'in* and at the same time prohibits her from being with another man. A consequence of this law is that a woman remains legally bonded to her husband if he does not acquiesce to the separation. If both parties wish for a divorce, the Jewish legal system can be fairly concise, and operates as a no-fault system. If one partner refuses, however, the process can be incredibly complicated. “The act of divorce is not dependent on any determination by the rabbinical court,” states Batsheva Sherman, “just as the act of *kiddushin* does not depend on the rabbi officiating the marriage ceremony, but only on the husband” (4). Serious problems occur when a woman wants to end the marriage and her husband does not; until he literally gives her a legal document of divorce, a *get*, voluntarily, his wife remains chained to him. (4)

The large number of “chained” women (*agunot*) has caused many to focus attention on the issue of *kinyan* (acquisition) in *kiddushin*. There is major controversy around this issue. Some believe that a woman who has been “acquired” belongs to her husband, almost like a piece of property or a slave to her master. Others maintain that the acquisition is symbolic. An intermediate position holds that the Jewish marriage act was originally a kind of acquisition but evolved over time into a contract between two equal parties. Many individuals including men

and women, scholars and journalists, rabbis and volunteers, have fought to maintain a fair practice. (6)

Norma Joseph discusses the complications of *get* refusal at length in her article “Civil Jurisdiction and Religious Accord: Bruker v. Marcovitz in the Supreme Court of Canada.” She posits that the Bible, while accepting marital break-ups, establishes a procedure that is the root of the problem. Joseph cites a biblical account of divorce found in Deuteronomy 24:1: “When a man has taken a wife, and married her, and it comes to pass she finds no favour in his eyes, because he has found some unseemliness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorce, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house” (*Complete Tanakh*). While the rabbinic court established that there need not be any grounds for divorce other than mutual consent, the man is still the initiator, the active legal protagonist, and must instigate, author, and hand her the document. The woman is only free once she receives the document (Joseph 5). Joseph states, “While in most cases Judaism’s tolerant acceptance of divorce enables a decent split, in too many situations this male prerogative becomes the means for extortion, vengeance, and affliction. Certainly this is not the biblical ideal. Thus, although her consent to divorce is necessary, the woman is still at the mercy of the man (4).”

Over the course of many centuries of developing Jewish law, people have tried and succeeded in improving divorce practices insofar as they limit a man’s unilateral power. There are rabbis who appreciate the vulnerable position in which women are situated under this legislation; however, they have not “legislated spousal equality” or rendered their own courts capable of overriding the husband’s sole authority (4-5). Joseph explains,

Jewish divorce, like any other, can be simple or complicated; a release or a tragedy; straightforward or a swindle. It can set people free to resume or reinvent their lives, or it

can embroil individuals and families in a never-ending cycle of abuse. The intent of rabbinic Judaism was to ensure a tolerable disengagement. Regrettably, the current implementation of the halakhic (Jewish law) system does not always meet the minimal standard. (5)

Yael Machtinger's doctoral dissertation is a comprehensive, qualitative study that tracks the slow social developments around Jewish *get* refusal in New York and Canada. She argues that "despite the increased visibility of *get* refusal in the media, much of the work being done, both social and legal, continues to perpetuate a gap between legal and social realities within Jewish communities, as well as silences, particularly in Toronto" (ii). Methodologically, Machtinger attempts to shift the parameters of studying *get* refusal by placing women's narratives of being refused a *get* at the centre of her analysis. She posits that, like other forms of domestic abuse, *get* refusal exists across multiple demographics and impacts women of varying religious observances (ii).

Machtinger extends this idea in an article published by the *Canadian Jewish News* entitled, "The Communal Blight of Get-Refusal" on March 9, 2020, the day before the Jewish holiday of Purim, in which she states, "At the heart of one of our most joyous holidays lies a dark, open secret that hides the suffering of invisible women in our community... Ta'anit Esther (the fast of Esther)... and International Agunah Day... are appropriately linked... drawing attention to hidden and silenced women" (1). She goes on to explain that, according to the Talmud, the protagonist from *Megillat Esther*, one of the five scrolls in the Bible that is recited on Purim, was forced into an unwanted marriage. "Esther" she states, "whose name comes from the word *hester*, meaning 'hidden,' was silenced" and, like Esther, *agunot* are at the mercy of their controlling spouses. *Agunot* "fear for their lives," as Esther did in the Purim story.

Machtinger advocates that we use this holiday to publicise the plight of *agunot*; however, she also poses the question, “[In the Purim story,] Queen Esther saved the Jewish people... who will save Jewish women from the abuse of *get* refusal?” (1)

Context: The *Shidduch* Crisis

This chapter is, first and foremost, auto-ethnographic. I entered the *frum* world as a teenager and tried desperately for ten years to get married and be fully accepted. I finally did get married, and then three-and-a-half years later I got divorced. I have been part of and moved by the radical change that I describe in these pages. My own experience as an orthodox divorced woman mirrors the conflation of the *shidduch* crisis and the divorce context that this chapter encapsulates.

The term “*shidduch* crisis” started making headlines in Jewish publications around 2005 when the first community initiative was made in Baltimore to help local single women find their matches (Rosenbaum). Their goal was to raise awareness about a serious problem in the *shidduch* world: that the number of single women who were looking to get married was increasing exponentially around the world. An article entitled, “*Mishpacha* Magazine Article on the *Shidduch* Crisis,” published in December 2006 by a popular website called *The Yeshiva World*, states: “To put it baldly, there are too many girls for too few boys.” This article poses the following hypothetical:

Assume that 1,000 boys and 1,000 girls are born in 1985. If the community grows by 4% per annum, the comparable cohort for those born four years later will be 1,160 boys and 1,160 girls. If boys marry, on average, girls four years younger than themselves (the actual figure for the *yeshiva* community is 3.5 years and for the overall non-Chassidic

orthodox community 3 years) we are left with a situation in which every cohort of 1,000 boys finds itself paired with a cohort of 1,160 girls. That is a recipe for disaster.

The author argues that other social norms play a role in the crisis as well; for example, it is a problem that men learn Torah for two or three years at their local *Bais Midrash* and then for another one or two years in *yeshiva* in Israel, while women only learn in seminary for one year before starting to *shidduch*-date.

Organizations like Kol Simcha and the North American *Shidduch* Initiative (NASI) created financial incentives for anyone who set up a date for women living in Baltimore. Many of these organizations and others speculated on the various causes of this global crisis. NASI posited an age gap theory suggesting that stigmas against men dating women their age or older were limiting dating options for women in their mid-to-late twenties and thirties. In 2011, NASI created a program that provided monetary incentives to *shadchanim* (matchmakers) who set up men with women the same age as them or older. Research was conducted to track the progress of their financial incentives. *Mishpacha* Magazine details (though does not cite) some data revealed from the first few years of this initiative, revealing that the “engagement per date” ratio was low, that few *shadchanim* matched more than one or two single women in response to the financial incentive, and that the initiative was not reaching enough of Baltimore’s ever-expanding community (Rosenbaum, “Up to Date”). According to the NASI website, the organization is now focussing their efforts on encouraging men in *yeshiva* to enter the *shidduch* world at a younger age, which would theoretically promote an age balance; if more nineteen-year-olds date other nineteen-year-olds, then the twenty-four-year-old men will be limited to dating women closer to their own age.

Orthodox publications and individuals have since invested a lot of time pondering the complexities of the *shidduch* system and trying to come up with solutions. An article entitled, “*Shidduch Crisis*” published in February 2020 begins with the author sharing that he “never get(s) involved in *shidduchim*” (Bensoussan, “*Shidduch Crisis*”). “I can handle a *beis din* (Jewish court),” says the author, “a prison cell, a classroom, a drug den. That stuff doesn’t scare me anymore. But I draw the line at *shidduchim*” (Bensoussan, “*Shidduch Crisis*”). In the article, Rabbi Bensoussan recounts an incident when an orthodox woman confronted him and his son at a coffee shop and implored the rabbi to help her twenty-year-old daughter in *shidduchim*. “My nine-year-old son was listening to this woman beg for her daughter’s life,” he recalls (Bensoussan, “*Shidduch Crisis*”). He agrees to speak to the daughter and receives a phone call from her that night. ““It’s so much pressure!”” says the woman. ““Everyone keeps asking why I’m not married yet. It’s like I’m worthless because I’m single”” (Bensoussan, “*Shidduch Crisis*”).

In many ways, this chapter is about my own journey in *shidduchim* and beyond – my testing of new waters (marriage, divorce) and my exploration of the cultural ramifications of those new realities, for myself and for others. In the pages that follow I am narrating my own story as much as others’. I started out in my research for this chapter seeking single women in the *shidduch* context, but I ended up somewhere else. I encountered divorced women with extraordinary stories that paralleled my own. The divorce process of the women in this chapter reflects Joseph’s articulation that Jewish divorce can “set people free to resume or reinvent their lives.” This resonates with my own experience of divorce: my *get* was given voluntarily and in peace. *Get* refusal is not the subject of this chapter; rather, I explore the lives of women who are close to me geographically and emotionally, many of whom are divorced, and how they and I

have responded to the challenges of becoming married and divorced and, like the woman who called Rabbi Bensoussan, admitted to feeling “worthless.”

The final chapter of this dissertation departs from the others insofar as it does not address attempts to line up with the law but rather social ostracism and othering that happens as a result of failing to align with Jewish orthodox norms. My reading of failure meets its limit in these cases where there is a disciplining of bodies who fail to measure up rather than simply embracing failure as a good unto itself. However, this chapter continues the overarching throughline of the dissertation in that it illustrates how orthodox women can be and are being idiosyncratic about their religious practice in unique and meaningful ways, sometimes in the face of adversity, while not transgressing or abandoning *halacha*. I want to suggest that women in this community – some whom identify as “modern orthodox,” some whom identify as scholars, and even some whom identify as *Charedi* – have found a way to live their failure as part of an essentially Jewish project over and against the ways in which they are viewed by more conservative members of the community.

D. Boyarin makes a critical intervention in *Unheroic Conduct* that I have found extremely useful as a framework for the ethnography of this chapter. He states,

Modern Jewish ‘Orthodoxy’ is marked by the pervasive (though not ubiquitous) misogyny and by nearly ubiquitous homophobia. Clearly the seedbed for extremely violent discourses on gender and sexuality is well prepared within rabbinic textuality; my task here is not to deny the existence of these seedbeds but to cultivate other ones that are equally “there” ... even if not highly regarded or even noted by the current social institutions within which Rabbinic Judaism is (mostly) lived. (13)

I hope that this chapter takes a page from Boyarin’s book and extends his mission not to deny the existence of certain troubling strands of rabbinic discourse but rather to cultivate additional strands that are “equally there.” There is no denying that there are certain toxic anti-feminist aspects of rabbinic culture. Both Feigenbaum and Weinberger’s articulations of “Billboard Judaism” and Chizhik-Goldschmidt’s commentary that I bring forth in this chapter on the *shidduch* crisis and the orthodox community’s obsession with beauty attest to this fact. What I do hope this dissertation accomplishes is to actively engage with individuals who work with, for, around, between, and effectively against the law and to construct ways of living Jewish life that are more hospitable to women. I went to a Torah class given by a high-profile public speaker in Toronto who is divorced. It is common knowledge that this woman, very observant and very much entrenched in the *Yeshivish* world, waited for her eldest daughter to become engaged before finalizing her divorce. (She told me privately that her mother had urged her to wait for her *youngest* daughter, age seven, to do the same. She respectfully refused.) To my surprise, she opened the class by addressing her divorce right off the bat. “I was recently asked by a student,” she asserted, “if, because I was divorced, I had not married my *bashert* (meant-to-be). And the answer is no. I did marry my *bashert*. But then life changed and he was no longer my *bashert*. Sometimes you hit a stage in your life in which you are no longer growing and thriving, and that means it’s time to move on to the next stage.”

Her candidness astonished me, not because I hadn’t heard those sentiments before – I had, from friends of mine who were also divorced – but because they were coming from the mouth of such a publicly respected lecturer. How could she make her divorce visible and link it to her Torah teachings so seamlessly?

I was married for three-and-a-half years before I got divorced. I remember vividly the time before I was married and how it felt to be single in the *frum* community: the heartache of watching my nineteen and twenty-year-old counterparts meet their matches and marry off hastily, and the grief at every fruitless attempt of my own. It was a simple task, I thought. And yet I couldn't manage to pull it off. I was bringing shame to my family and all who cared for me. I was a failure.

At the age of twenty-two, I spent six months learning in a seminary in Jerusalem. I lived with my aunt and uncle in a *Charedi* community called *Neve Yaakov*. The neighbourhood was praying for me, I was told. I was met with saddened eyes at Shabbat tables: "May *Hashem* bless you with your *zivug* (life partner) very soon." I had no idea what the concern was, at first, as twenty-two was considered young by North American standards, but I quickly discovered how my age was inscribed on me in this particular strand of *Charedi* society.

It was then that I learned (experientially) about a power dynamic that I would later experience repeatedly over the course of my twenties at home in Toronto. This is part of a grander politic at play between Marrieds and Singles, of which these were first principles:

- Marrieds know more than Singles about dating and relationships.
- Marrieds know more than Singles about life in general.
- Marrieds have a right to comment on Singles' single status.

What ends up playing out is the following:

- Marrieds ask Singles invasive questions about dating and relationships and subsequently pass judgment.
- Marrieds ask Singles invasive questions about life in general and subsequently pass judgment.

- Marrieds speculate on reasons why Singles are single and consider these notions as facts.

Because I spent over three years on the other side of the coin, I know first-hand that much of this dynamic is not in fact imagined. I also know this from the testimonies of friends and interviewees who have voiced that they feel patronized, mistreated and ostracised. Reflecting on my own experience as a Single, I believe that equal to my pain of not having a spouse was the shame I felt for my positionality in my community. I remember on more than one occasion saying the words that I “am embarrassed to be alive” – embarrassed to go to the grocery store or to synagogue. Feeling ashamed attending *Kiddush* (the social gathering directly following synagogue services) of my sheer existence. I felt like I didn’t have the space to enjoy Judaism as a Single; more than that, I didn’t have *the right* to enjoy it. Remnants of this shame remained after I divorced. I remember being invited for a meal on Sukkot by a lovely *yeshivish* family in my community, soon after I signed my *get*. I called my good friend Rivka (pseudonym), a *Charedi* woman in her mid-thirties who is single but not divorced, and asked if it’s embarrassing for me to go solo, since I had only ever joined them previously with my ex. “Totally. Super embarrassing,” was her response. “But no more so than every single Shabbat that I spend at people’s houses.” “You can join me at the kids table!” she quipped. Sad but true, Singles in their twenties, thirties, and sometimes forties, are often seated at the far end of the Shabbat table with the children.

Leadership roles are occupied by Marrieds, not in theory but in practice. The community in which I was situated before I was married had no place for Singles; I was considered a second-class citizen. Marrieds spoke to me with condescension and asked invasive questions. No matter how intelligent, accomplished, or successful I felt, my viewpoints and perspectives were always taken with a grain of salt, the underlying presumption being that I could only know so much if I

was unmarried. The prejudice against an unmarried woman is that if she isn't married, there must be something wrong with her. In an online panel discussion of the show *Unorthodox* entitled, “‘Unorthodox,’ Intimacy, and Accuracy: How Accurate is its Portrayal of Hasidic Intimacy?”, one of the panellists, Diana Melnick, who works as a registered Psychotherapist and Sex Therapist and is also an orthodox Jew living in Toronto, comments that “there is a huge stigma against single people. You can have a twenty-year-old with a diamond and a *sheitel* (wig) who is taken very seriously, and an accomplished thirty-five-year-old [whose] word is nothing” (43:20-35).

After I got divorced, a well-meaning gentleman from my synagogue called me with the intention of matchmaking. “Are you *shomer negiah*?” he asked. (*Negiah* refers to the rabbinic laws prohibiting physical touch between men and women before marriage. Being *shomer negiah* means that one observes these laws.) I was shocked that a stranger, especially a man, would ask any woman about her sex life, never mind a thirty-something who has been previously married. “Would you ask a married woman if she and her husband practice *niddah*?” I was tempted to ask. In another instance, a well-intentioned woman sent me the following text after I declined to go on a second date with a man she set me up with. “Here’s something to think about ... to always commit in your mind to 3 dates, right off the bat ... unless you know that it’s a resounding no ... to give it another chance.” Regardless of whether her method has merit, I found this unsolicited advice rather patronizing. Would it be appropriate for me to give her parenting advice? Or to counsel her on how to care for her elderly parents? There is an obvious double standard when it comes to *shidduchim*; unmarried women are to some degree infantilized because of their single status.

One friend of mine, Pessie (pseudonym), a young woman in her mid-twenties who was raised in a *Charedi* family, has been *shidduch* dating for the last five years. Pessie told me that she feels she is “treated like garbage” by *shadchanim*. After sharing with her some of my own dating challenges, Pessie said to me, “By the way, it’s not just the older [singles] and the divorced [singles] that are having a hard time. The *shidduch* crisis is across the board. I have, quote unquote, ‘everything going for me,’ and I’m still treated terribly.” She went on to say that she “gets rejected” by ninety-percent of the men that *shadchanim* bring to her attention, and that the *shadchanim* are often less than tactful in their communications. Pessie says that oftentimes, when *shadchanim* reach out to her about a potential match, they will send her the young man’s résumé and then either never follow up (even after Pessie reaches out multiple times, requesting clarification) or respond curtly with yes or no answers from the male counterparts. Since socializing and direct contact between single men and women is discouraged in *Charedi* communities, many Singles, unfortunately, rely on this paltry communication; they are almost exclusively dependent on *shadchanim* for dates. This lack of friendliness and engagement on the part of *shadchanim* can feel impersonal and objectifying.

Marrieds often facilitate matches as well, though are not considered official *shadchanim*. Pessie tells me that she feels her married friends mistreat her when it comes to *shidduchim*; specifically, that they “hold information over her.” In one instance, Pessie’s friend suggested her brother-in-law as a potential match, and then insisted that Pessie speak directly to her mother-in-law, so that the mother-in-law could determine if Pessie would be suitable for her son. Pessie countered by asking her friend for the young man’s name so that she could do her own research (i.e. make inquiries within her own network), and avoid the vulnerable and invasive experience of being ‘interviewed’ by the mother-in-law. Her friend refused to give her this name.

One night in February 2020, Pessie and I were having dinner with Rivka (referenced earlier), who is also a friend of Pessie's, and the subject of *shidduchim* and the *shidduch* crisis came up in conversation. Rivka, raised in the same community as Pessie but ten years her senior, pulls out her phone and shows us an e-mail that she had recently received from a *shadchan* after declining a suggested match without disclosing to her the reason:

*Hi Rivka,*

*I hope you're making smart moves in your shidduchim!*

*I never heard anything negative about him. i only heard great things about him. i myself set him up with a few girls, and my friend shadchon [Ashkenaz pronunciation of shadchan] I work with, also set him up with MANY girls just this year alone. many girls wanted him very much, and still want him very much, but he has his criteria (just like anyone else does, including yourself) and I'm sure he hopes to find it as soon as possible. It's possible that some of your friends (or their relatives) may of [sic] gotten a rejection from him in the past, so their reaction about him would be negative, unfortunately this is common in many cases.*

*As far as having similar ideas as this one, we can't say we know other boys that are similar to this one "on paper". we have some who are more Yeshivish, and some that are more modern. those who are similar to him are younger, and theyre only willing to go out with younger (sorry we wish we can change that). so at this point, all we can say is we'll keep you in mind!*

*between you and me, Rivka, let's talk real, you're in your 30's and we know, as much as you do, that older girls are struggling, if you had a date in the past 12 months, you're from the better ones, and you know that, so do we! so when a boy gives you a yes, where*

*things look a match on paper, especially an all around solid boy, well balanced in many ways, which is hard to find, yes hard to find, the ONLY SMART thing wouldve been is to first meet him.*

*I hope this email will serve as a turning point in your future thinking process! [Sic.]*

While Pessie and I were obviously shocked by the content of this e-mail, we weren't surprised. Rhetoric of this nature is common amongst Singles and *shadchanim*/Marrieds – being shamed for one's age and decision to decline a match, the glaring double standard that men are allowed “their criteria” but “let's be real,” women in their thirties are not, and the appalling condescension in how Singles are spoken to, are par-for-the-course in the bizarre circus that is the *shidduch* world.

Of course, not all interactions with *shadchanim* are negative. Many *shadchanim* I know are lovely and graciously volunteer their time and effort in the service of helping Singles. And many *shidduchim* (matches) are created without incident. “*Shidduch* résumés” are common practice in the orthodox dating world and are circulated widely amongst individuals (including but not limited to *shadchanim*) in attempts to network. *Shidduch* résumés contain an individual's name, contact information, age, height, geographic location, synagogue affiliations, previous marital status (divorced, children), family information (including names of parents and all siblings and their marital statuses and professions – a fact that shocks my secular friends), education including high school and university (if applicable), *yeshiva*/seminary, profession (if applicable – some men learn in *kollel*, a form of adult *yeshiva*, or as comedian David Finkelstein calls it, “Jew School,” full time), and a paragraph about what they are looking for in a match.

Photos (one headshot and one full length) are also required for these résumés, and are often not-so-subtly criticized by *shadchanim*. Pessie told me that she once received a text from a

*shadchan* that read “Any updated photos?”, to which she responded, “Um... I just sent you some last week.” The *shadchan* repeated, “I know... Any new ones?”

These documents are constantly being circulated widely by matchmakers, Marrieds, and Singles worldwide. In an infamous scandal in 2019, thousands of *shidduch* résumés were leaked from a website called “Shidduchline,” which advertises itself as having the information of 3,000 singles, and published many of these documents online without the subjects’ permission (Chizhik-Goldschmidt, “What Happens”). In an article published by *The Forward* entitled “What Happens When Thousands of *Shidduch* Résumés are Leaked?”, Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt writes that “it took a few days for victims to figure out how their information had been leaked. Most believe that the résumés were collected via a popular email list-serve for Orthodox matchmakers, called Ezer Kneqdo [considered a legitimate organization].” Malkie Rosenberg is quoted in the article, stating, “this whole thing made me reconsider *shidduch* profiles and online safety altogether. People can figure out where I live [from this] – my name, my kids. These are not good people who are trying to help Klal Yisrael [the Jewish people].” Another woman, named T. in the article, is quoted, “People think that singles are disposable... they think, ‘Sure, you’re a guy, you’re a girl, let’s set you up.’ Yeah, I want to be dating, but that doesn’t mean I want all my information posted online. There is a total lack of control” (Chizhik-Goldschmidt).

In many ways, this scandal shed light on some of the issues around *shidduch* dating, with new technological tools and channels being utilized toward globalization, as well as infrastructural problems, with websites and matchmakers not being adequately funded or screened. The objectification of women in particular that occurs in and on these forums is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

There are many orthodox women who are engaging with these problems of objectification within the *shidduch* system and beyond. Adina Sash for example, is an orthodox Jewish blogger and influencer, best known for her “Flatbush Girl” videos, which have nearly 50,000 subscribers. Sash pushes the boundaries of her conservative community in Brooklyn, NY, with satirical posts and videos about the traditional women’s role, including blow-torching her challah bread, accidentally dropping her wig in the *mikveh* designated for dishes when *toiveling* (sanctifying) a pot, and jumping into a pool wearing a formal dress, heels, wig, and full face of makeup because you “have to look your best at all times.” She even draws a beard on her face in one of her videos and performs a fictional “Rabbi Stein” character, preaching that orthodox women shouldn’t get a second earring hole or nose ring. In an interview with *NOW THIS*, Sash says, “I’ve been slut-shamed for the length of my wig ... for having a loud voice, for trying to talk about women’s issues ... I’ve been told that it’s just purely about being an attention-whore.” One of the many significant aspects of Sash’s work is that she is (and others are) using social media to call out patriarchal norms. She asserts that “it’s about creating a safe space for girls and women to assess their lives and deconstruct it so that whatever we do, we do with meaning and purpose and feeling present in our daily lives.” She correctly states that there is no “board of rabbis” that needs to approve a post before it goes up, which is why social media has led to an explosion of “females taking back their voices” (Sash).

The web series *Soon By You* is another example of *shidduch* dating satire in which a group of six modern orthodox friends navigate the Jewish dating scene in Manhattan. Leah Gottfried, Danny Hoffman, and Jessica Schechter produce video episodes that satirize *shidduch* pitfalls and mishaps, like pretending to speak Hebrew for a Skype date and wedding-crashing to

find dates. YouTube and social media can be transformative platforms for orthodox Jewish people to question, challenge, test, and disrupt existing social norms via performance.

There are only a few published scholarly articles that address *shidduch* dating. Some of these articles present a rosy view of orthodox dating. Others are more scholarly; Avidan Milevsky, Deborah Shifra Niman, Atara Raab and Ruchie Gross published a paper entitled, “A Phenomenological Examination of Dating Attitudes in Ultra-Orthodox Emerging Adult Women,” which investigates the dating attitudes of eight “ultra-orthodox” Jewish young women using qualitative analysis. This paper found themes of pressures associated with the dating process and the importance of dating for marriage. The study found that interviewees expressed satisfaction with the dating system due to its single-minded focus on finding a marriage partner (i). My ethnography problematizes some of the themes represented in this study as it expresses alternative perspectives on and outcomes of *shidduch* dating that do not solely reflect feelings of satisfaction. Ariel Y. Penkower’s significant dissertation, *The Culture of Dating and Single Life in the Modern Orthodox Jewish Community* is a qualitative study that observes the growing number of individuals in the modern orthodox Jewish community attempting to find spouses but who are unsuccessful. She posits that “unmarried individuals in the community are frequently viewed implicitly – and all too often explicitly – as second-class citizens” (ii). Citing the term “*shidduch* crisis,” Penkower’s study in the area of applied and professional psychology concluded that singles felt they were viewed as inferior by the dominant community and often struggled with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Penkower’s scholarly criticism on dating rituals resonates with journalistic writing that has appeared on the *shidduch* crisis. Chizhik-Goldschmidt, for example, published an influential article in *The Forward* entitled, “The Shidduch Crisis has led to an Orthodox Obsession with Female Beauty.” Here she argues that the

*shidduch* system claims to protect women from objectification but actually subjects them to it (Chizhik-Goldschmidt).

Hannah Rockman's article, "Matchmaker Matchmaker Make Me a Match: The Art and Conventions of Jewish Arranged Marriages" describes the mechanics of the *shidduch* process in detail, explaining the historical and psychosocial development of matchmaking, in order to enable marital therapists to understand how to employ boundaries when seeing couples from an orthodox background (Rockman). Rockman's article provides context of the *shidduch* system with the express purpose of improving clinical therapeutic practices, something that is addressed at length in the panel discussion on *Unorthodox* previously cited (discussed further in the conclusion of this dissertation). Ruth Tsuria conducts research in the related area of how Judaism and digital media intersect, specifically, how Jewish Question and Answer websites inform and regulate how understandings and practices of gender and sexuality, arguing that by confessing their sexual transgressions religious self-regulation is happening online (Tsuria). My analysis in this chapter extends this body of work, which is mostly situated in the field of psychology, by drawing from film, television, performance theory, and auto-ethnography as a framework.

My interest in the social issues of orthodox women, including women who are divorced and are now back on the "*shidduch* scene," led me to conduct a series of interviews with women in the community who have, in one form or another, experienced the Single problem, the *Shidduch* Crisis. Some of these women are divorced, others have commenced their journey toward finding their match. All women interviewed in the pages that follow are individuals with whom I have a relationship and belong to my personal social world.

The reason I chose to include the experiences of individuals close to me rather than those from a wider group of people is due to the grassroots nature of my fieldwork in this area.

Methodologically, this chapter sticks out from the rest of the dissertation as it departs from the idea that orthodox Jewish individuals consciously use the complex framework of *halacha* to engage more deeply in their Judaism, resulting in a “perfectly imperfect” hyperperformance of orthodoxy. While this ethnography shares some commonalities with the others in that these women have found creative ways to (dis)identify with the culture in which they are a part, it differs in that their intention is not *necessarily* to actively engage with *halacha* (as is the case with immersing in a *mikveh*, performing a *Seder*, or wearing *tzitzit*) or to make their Jewishness meaningful or relevant. These women are simply living their lives as orthodox Jewish singles, dating for the purpose of marriage (a behaviour not unique to orthodox Jews), and in so doing are discriminated against. Since I have experienced this prejudice first-hand alongside my peers, conversations between us have emerged organically in which we share our feelings and struggles as part of the *shidduch* crisis. What started as impromptu tête-à-têtes became central sites of inquiry; as I probed into what my friends were going through, I became deeply invested in these issues. While all the participants in this study have consented to their testimonies being published here (all names and identifying features have been altered to preserve confidentiality, as is the case with all interviewees in this dissertation), in this chapter, not all interviews began as formal interviews. Some started as conversations over dinner, in hotel lobbies after *shidduch* events, and during walks in parks on long Shabbat afternoons. As an auto-ethnographic account, this chapter includes personal comments as well. While I share the concerns of my interviewees, I also attempt to take a step back and analyse their experiences from a sociological standpoint.

### A Feminist Failing

I selected four interviewees for this chapter, Liat, Shayna, Libby, and Rebecca, who are all between the ages of 20-39, live in Toronto, identify as orthodox, and have chosen to subscribe to

the *shidduch* system, which means developing a *shidduch* profile, networking with matchmakers, and participating in the formulaic manner of dating prescribed by orthodox culture (based on etiquette texts and rabbinic traditions). I knew all of the participants in advance and, when soliciting formal interviews, communicated with them via e-mail. When editing these interviews, it was important to me to ultimately select the testimonies of those who had been participating in this system for over two years, so that this chapter could potentially speak to some of the challenges that women experience with the purpose of exploring what has been termed the “crisis” of *shidduch* dating. While all the women I spoke to live in Toronto, many travel to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and other cities in the United States and even abroad, sometimes for a period of weeks or even months, for the purpose of *shidduch* dating. This is common practice in Toronto, since its dating pool is relatively small in comparison to other cities in the U.S.. In my experience, I would say that it was very common, say, ten years ago, for men to travel to the woman’s home city for a first date; however, in my observation, this is no longer an expectation. Since single women started outnumbering single men in orthodox circles (arguably the cause of the *shidduch* crisis, as previously stated), many men realized that they no longer had to put in the effort to travel, since they could just as easily pursue local women without hassle. Geography compounds the *shidduch* crisis in that women who live in more densely populated orthodox communities have more dating opportunities, which heightens feelings of anxiety and competition for so called “out of town”<sup>27</sup> women as they are placed at a dating disadvantage. While I am aware that the *shidduch* crisis exists across the globe and is not limited to Toronto, this chapter speaks to the particular challenges that women living in Toronto

---

<sup>27</sup>“Out of town” is a term that can be used literally to describe people, often women, located in smaller cities and/or orthodox Jewish communities. It is also a term that is used disparagingly against women connoting a lack of worldliness, refinement, and style.

face. What I found in the editing process of this ethnography was that, despite the disadvantages, there are significant themes of leadership and emotional strength in the material gathered from divorced women specifically. I have chosen to foreground those in this chapter.

Liat

So compelling were the testimonies of divorced women that I only ended up including one interview with a woman who had never been married, and that was with a twenty-five year-old *Ba'alat Teshuvah* named Liat. Liat lives in an orthodox neighbourhood just north of Bathurst and Lawrence in Toronto at the time of this interview. Growing up, she attended secular Jewish day schools until she was eighteen and then chose to enrol in a *Charedi* seminary in Jerusalem specifically for *Ba'alat Teshuvah* women. Liat has been *shidduch* dating for five years. During our two-hour interview, what strikes me immediately is the self-empowerment she describes; rather than focussing on the hardships of singlehood in orthodox Toronto, she describes the discoveries that she has made while navigating *shidduchim* and what she finds valuable about the dating process.

I think there's a lot of value to being single that the community misses ... [It] is a unique time to explore yourself: your interests, your values, who you are, and what you want out of life. The religious community seems to misunderstand the importance of this time. They're still very much functioning on a model that needs to be restructured. (Liat, Interview, July 2016)

Liat chooses to live a mainstream orthodox life. She is intent on finding a husband and is also content with the fact that she hasn't yet. Liat's possesses a combination of traditional *Yeshivishness* and modern sensibilities. She elaborates further on the paradigm shift that she believes is incumbent on the community of which she is a part.

Maybe if there was less pressure to get married so young, the dating scene wouldn't be so tense, and people would feel more comfortable to get to know each other. I understand there's a biological component ... All the more reason why things today are so much more complex than they have been historically: Young people in our times are confronted with countless challenges exclusive to their generation and not any other demographic. Being young and religious means that you consider not only your personal value system, but also, the global values which infiltrate your community inevitably through Internet etc. We're so uber-focused on getting married expediently, that we miss the time necessary to figure out who we will be in our marriage.

Unlike many of her peers, Liat sees ambition, career, and self-realization as a given for women. Many women in her community view their singleness as a 'waiting room to marriage.' In contrast, Liat views the Single process as meaningful. She suggests,

This time is especially important for women, who need to juggle their intellectual interests and/or financial responsibilities via their careers while balancing their roles as mothers and wives. In a way, religious singlehood for women is a beautiful time, because self-exploration, both personal and professional, can be guided by the wholesome and protective values of traditional Jewish dating norms. Young women who have the time to identify with their personal needs, goals, and wants during their twenties, are, at least in my opinion, more ready in certain ways to create the kind loving, stable homes they envision for their husbands and families ... It's ironic that the community quells the importance of this time, when in fact, it is the most vital period of exploration and self-definition that makes you a better and more dedicated partner.

Shayna

Shayna is a woman who, like Liat, does not view her singlehood as a waiting room to marriage. She is thirty years old and lives in Toronto at the time of this interview. Shayna was raised by parents with different religious affiliations: one orthodox and one secular. Raised with an awareness of Shabbat and *kashrut*, Shayna attended a conservative Jewish elementary school and a community Jewish high school. When she was eighteen she decided to attend an orthodox seminary in Jerusalem. Shayna identifies as modern orthodox *Machmir* (stringent), a modern orthodox *halachic* lifestyle that readily engages the secular world. Shayna became divorced at the age of twenty-eight after what she shares with me were three unhappy years of marriage. She has lived most of her life in an orthodox area a few streets south of the Bathurst and Lawrence intersection. There is a population of Jewish families here that is highly devout. Shayna shares with me during our two-and-a-half-hour interview that she experiences the stigma every day in this community from being divorced. The matchmaker from the Israeli television series *Shtisel* describes the stigma against divorced women in *charedi* communities perfectly, when he is asked by a single man in his twenties to be matched with a previously married woman in her thirties, and the matchmaker aptly retorts: “Are you out of your mind? She is like a *schnitzel* that was frozen, thawed, heated up, frozen, thawed, heated up in the microwave, and served on a paper plate” (Elon and Indursky 11:10). This analogy, while absurd, rings all too true when considering the rhetoric around divorced women in *Charedi* Toronto. In her highly-concentrated neighbourhood of orthodox Jews, Shayna feels limited by the divorced label that has been imposed on her.

When Shayna was first married, she moved a few blocks north of this neighbourhood to an equally traditional area situated within the same larger community. After her divorce, Shayna relocated to an area of Toronto around Eglinton Avenue that is still partially Jewish, but outside

of the ‘*cholent* pot.’ She shares with me some of her experiences transitioning from one community to the other. Shayna’s account adds a socio-geographic dimension to this study that I believe is quite significant. Early on in our conversation she hammers out some of the specifics of the Bathurst and Lawrence subculture. She tells me how she had contemplated the ways in which her divorce factored into a checklist of socio-economic variables that comprise the Bathurst and Lawrence community. She states,

My divorce is just one of various boxes to be ticked off in this major culture. Boxes like, Where do you send your kids to school? *How* do you think about where to send your kids to school? How do you view your education? How do you view the Jewish community? Where do you *daven* [literally “pray”; figuratively “attend synagogue”]? *How* do you *daven* [pray]? What do you dress like? How much money do you have? Where do you live? What does your *lawn* look like? (Shayna, Interview, August 2016)

She went on to describe the pressures of this community, including those to conform and to “have it all together” (like Adina Sash, before she jumps into a pool) (Sash).

There’s this crazy pressure to look like you have it all together ... To look nice. And even the standards of what “looks nice” is so variant from a community that’s more like, say, St. Louis or Cleveland ... So for me, relating to my divorce and singlehood is just one of multiple factors that I may or may not tick or that other people may or may not tick. For me, that’s been the truest experience of seeing; What is the culture and do I really care to fit into this culture? Do I want to interact with it? I am trying to see individuals and ideas as opposed to dealing with people as a collective.

When I ask Shayna about her transition from the Bathurst and Lawrence community to the one in which she is currently situated, she shares with me the following:

This area, I feel, has fewer restrictions. It's less Jewish, it's less religious observance-wise. It's more diverse in terms of the culture, and so too, economically, it's more diverse. When I took a bus in that area [Bathurst and Lawrence] I knew there were people driving by me and looking at me ... Here, I'm more anonymous because it's just more diverse. Having lived in that community, where it's a lot more homogeneous in terms of the religious standards and the looks ... There's a lot more pressure. And, I mean, it makes sense, because in order to live in that area and also to send your kids to those schools, you have to have a lot of money or you have to have someone supporting you.

The materialistic pressures and demands for homogeneity that Shayna speaks about is an ongoing theme in this study. Chizhik-Goldschmidt offers similar observations in her influential "The 'Shidduch Crisis' exposé. The author makes an argument that the *shidduch* world objectifies women in ways that directly contradict Jewish values. She writes from a position of being recently married and reflecting on the not-so-far-gone memories of being single in *frum* society.

With the snap of the fingers, I had become that "young married woman," that woman flicking her wig bangs away from her eyes ... Now I get to hear the other side of the Orthodox dating world, that of the matchmaker ... I listen and nod, head spinning with my own memories. The pressure on these young women is unbearable – my mind rushes to the years of starving, the endless salon sessions, never venturing outside without full makeup ... I still can't believe I got married without having to go under a knife – never mind without a dowry, Jerusalem apartment or trust fund ... This is the reality of the "elite" of the religious world. (Chizhik-Goldschmidt)

I once attended a Friday night dinner event for orthodox singles and the speaker, an orthodox rabbi, was giving a class on dating advice. (A rather on-the-nose lecture topic for a singles event, in my opinion – why not the *Parsha*, the weekly Torah portion?) When addressing the women in the room, he remarked that he is shocked by how many single women he sees at the kosher grocery store without any makeup on. “For goodness sakes,” he exclaimed, “if you’re going to Pomegranate (a popular kosher supermarket in Brooklyn, NY), don’t look like you just came from the gym!” The standards that single women must live up to are ridiculous and relate to many of Rabbi Feigenbaum’s critique of a “style over substance” ideology in Bais Yaakov schools (see p. 25 of this dissertation). When they come-of-age, *frum* women enter a world of vanity and materialism that is utterly antithetical to the teachings of the Talmud and the Torah. The external eclipses the internal to such a degree that women are, in the words of Chizhik-Goldschmidt, “becoming ghosts,” as forms of female objectification intensify *shidduch* culture. She argues that the conspicuous absence of female images from orthodox Jewish publications only further contributes to the objectification and thus sexualization of women, not the other way around. The author states,

So when I am told constantly that the religious world protects women from being objectified, by omitting their images – that this reflects some “essential community value” of appreciating women’s inner beauty of externals – I can’t help but laugh at how out of touch this is from reality. It’s a joke. Simply look at our eating disorder numbers.<sup>28</sup>

Or ask any young orthodox woman who has gone through or continues to go through the

---

<sup>28</sup> Caryn Gorden published an article in *Psychology Today* entitled “Eating Disorders in the Orthodox Jewish Community,” stating that unique cultural and religious elements such as mixed and contradictory obligations embedded in the religion, the importance of food, the significance of family and the *shidduch* phenomenon distinguish eating disorders in the orthodox Jewish population. It states, “The *shidduch* process has morphed, for some, into a shopping expedition with a list of attributes the man is expecting in a potential mate; the ‘*shidduch* résumé’ has become commonplace” (Gorden).

systems of *shidduchim* – that all powerful machine that ensures communal obedience – ... and she will tell you just how lofty spirited her community experience is. (Chizhik-Goldschmidt)

It is not a secret that there is a real lack of female representation in orthodox Jewish media. Some publications do not include photos of women; others take photos from secular media and then photoshop the women's faces out for their publication. Some Jewish organizations will even announce women as honourees for fundraising dinners but only include photos of the male honourees. The publications and the organizations defend these practices on the grounds of *tzniut*, modesty – that it is not 'appropriate.'

Many have made efforts to integrate visual representations of women into mainstream orthodox culture including, amazingly, the famous Lubavitcher *Rebbe*, leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, considered to be one of the most influential Jewish leaders of the twentieth century. Decades ago, he insisted that children's educational materials include pictures of girls as well as boys on the cover. "There must be a girl!" he would write in Hebrew on magazines that lacked a girl image. This is also evident in *Kikar Shabbat*, Israel's most influential online *Charedi* publication, which features images of women, as well as on various social media outlets, including Instagram feeds and Facebook groups where orthodox women are creating alternative ways for their faces to exist.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the *shidduch* community in Toronto has a serious vanity issue and women within it have the choice to either participate and "marry *frum*" or remove themselves and run the risk of isolation. Chizhik-Goldschmidt argues,

When [women's] pictures remain forbidden, when religious women's magazines only portray empty beach chairs and empty kitchens, when women are mere ghosts – what

exactly is the message being sent ...? That they are at once expected to be hidden yet also on display? Today's religious woman is caught between two extreme worlds – a religious world which offers only contradictions, which tells us that our beauty is key to happiness in life yet we should also hide ourselves lest we attract attention – and a secular world.

As I think about Shayna's experiences in her community in conjunction with Chizhik-Goldschmidt's commentary on materialism, I consider the importance of foregrounding women's voices in cultural context. In *Unorthodox*, Esty cites the famous Talmudic expression, "If not me then who; if not now then when?" (Hender, Karolinski and Winger 22:50, "Part 4"). But the first clause of this quotation is a mistranslation. In the original text in *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Hillel says, "*Im ein ani li, mi li?*" "If I am not *for me*, who will be for me?" (my emphasis) (Avot 1:14:1). In other words, if there is no 'I' – no self – for myself, who is mine? As orthodox women, we need an "I" for ourselves. How incredible it would be if *shidduch* dating could be reframed for women to focus on the things expressed previously by Liat: their interests, their values, who they are, and what they want out of life (see p. 241 of this dissertation). If not now, when?

Libby

Libby is a very close friend of mine, a *Ba'alat Teshuva*, who became religious in her twenties. She was raised in Toronto near Eglinton Avenue until her early adolescence when her family moved to Lawrence and Marlee Avenue. She was raised in a secular, single-parent household, and attended a conservative Jewish Day School for elementary school and then a community Jewish high school. When Libby was becoming more devout in her early twenties, she decided to make *Aliyah* (move to Israel) and study in a *Charedi* seminary for women. Upon her arrival, she met a man on a parallel path studying at a *yeshiva* under the same umbrella organization as

her seminary, whom she subsequently married and then divorced. Libby, thirty years old and living in Toronto at the time of our interview, describes her marriage as being doomed from the start. When I ask her when things started to go sour, she responded that she felt a shift as early as her wedding night. After a year-and-a-half of work, including marriage counselling, rabbinic consultation, and relocation to another city, Libby cut her losses and divorced when she was twenty-four.

I remember the morning she received her *get*. I drove her to the synagogue where she was to meet the chief rabbi of Toronto and her soon-to-be-ex-husband. I parked the car and looked at her in the passenger seat. Her eyes were lifeless. As she calmly released her seatbelt, I asked if she wanted me to go in with her, but she answered that she wanted to do it alone.

She later informed me that her ex was two-and-a-half hours late for the appointment. She and the chief rabbi waited patiently in the synagogue. She didn't share with me the specifics of what was undoubtedly an excruciating purgatory, but she did say that this prominent rabbi, a notably intimidating figure, was extremely kind and waited patiently with her until he arrived.

In the years that followed, Libby was reborn. She became ravenously interested in Torah study and began teaching classes to small collectives of women that gathered together. On Shabbat afternoons, we congregated at a friend's home, and she would present her interpretation of the weekly Torah portion. As this practice evolved, more and more women attended, until dozens of women were crammed into a two-bedroom apartment to hear Libby speak.

She became a *rebbetzin* of sorts, a female rabbinic figure in our community, her trademark symbol being the enormous cone-shaped turban she wore atop her head. While many orthodox women in our community donned colourful headscarves in observance of the law that you cover your hair once you are married, Libby's was different, and not only due to its

enormousness. Since Libby was divorced, her turban was unusual; *Charedi* women, indeed, still cover their heads when they are divorced; their guise, however, is far less conspicuous, as they, like Marrieds, often wear extremely realistic wigs made from authentic human hair. Libby displayed her divorce with brightly coloured textiles and interwoven neon fabrics. She wore beads and florals, tassels and glitter. Her *tichel* (headscarf) was on steroids and her divorce was a billboard for all to see.

In her *shiurim* (Jewish classes), she spoke candidly, drawing from personal experience, including her divorce. These classes were so popular that she started writing a weekly blog, which climbed to over 11,000 views. Her words were honest and explicit, ever deepening her connection to her *yiddeshkeit* (Judaism) and her self-acceptance simultaneously.

I ask Libby about her memories as a Single in the *frum* community in Toronto. During our three-hour conversation, she shares with me the following:

We learn from our sages that navigating through this world is like walking on a very narrow bridge. Even the word *halacha* suggests that there is a route one must take. As the philosopher and theorist Sarah Ahmed discusses in a different context, seemingly, there is a standard way, an ideal journey, and this carved footpath leads to fulfilment; I had always thought that, as a woman, I would not only walk this path but I would stay in line, with balanced and graceful footing and march at pace. (Libby, Interview, July 2016)

As a university-educated *Ba'alat Teshuva*, Libby has scholarly knowledge that extends beyond Torah subjects, as evidenced by her Ahmed citation. Her teachings always blend religious and secular texts, interweaving her biblical interpretations with literary and theoretical references.

The standard path that she describes in the passage above is a kind of Althusserian hailing that a

religious society performs and which she was eager to respond to by self-identifying as a married woman.

When I got divorced it felt as if I had stumbled (and then been catapulted) over the edge of the bridge that God had laid before me, that there was no longer a roadmap of how or who I should be. No longer was I marching forward, I had retreated back to murky unsteady ground. When I was married I was in-line; I was meeting the necessary checkpoints of my female journey. But in the dissolution of that union, I lost my footing. Suddenly, the ground was shaking.

What Libby describes is a feeling of destabilization that many individuals who experience divorce face, regardless of religious affiliation. Libby's version is heightened, however, because of the particularly formulaic norms of orthodox Judaism and her inability to comply with those norms at this juncture of her life. She was thrown off the bridge, as she says, and no longer had a path to follow.

The acquired wife-ly *mitzvos* [Ashkenaz pronunciation of *mitzvot*, commandments], specific ways of approaching the Divine that one attains after the *chuppah* (Jewish wedding canopy) like *mikveh*, *shalom bayis* (peace in the household), and *Taharat HaMishpacha* (laws of family purity), were no longer relevant to my voyage. I had held those cherished *mitzvos* so tightly when I was walking in formation, but in stepping out of line, they had been taken from me. The existential question emerged, how was I supposed to relate to God as a woman while standing in this liminal space? Neither single, nor married, but divorced. I felt painfully different and exposed, like my abnormal road map had been spread and left wide open for all to see ... All you had to do was look at me.

What Libby is referencing when she cites the Jewish woman's *mitzvah* trinity – *mikveh*, *shalom bayis* (peace in the home), and *Taharat HaMishpacha* (laws of family purity) – is a fundamental tension for women in the orthodox community: the three major leadership *mitzvot* for women are only applicable to married women. There are, of course, other commandments that pertain to single women, including prayer, *kashrut*, Shabbat, and so forth, but the laws that are female-specific and require heightened levels of authority are the big three that Libby mentions, all of which were now eliminated from her performance repertoire. What was left was a God-size hole. Libby's newly divorced status now called into question her life's purpose as a Jewish woman. What would fill the void? What could she do amidst her grief over the loss of her former life?

Chana, a prophet in the the Torah (notably, one of many women in the Bible who struggle with infertility), has her own suffering: her inability to conceive a child. In her desperation she turns to God, pouring her heart out. Chana was the first to move her lips in silent prayer, what is now taught in Jewish tradition to be an act of true *kavanah* (intention). However, in the Navi (book of Prophets), Eli, the high priest, sees Chana's lips moving while she sways her body back and forth and admonishes her, calling her a drunk (Samuel 1:13, *Complete Tanakh*). In the face of adversity, Chana uses what tools she has to persevere: her body and her faith. And it is from this gesture that the Jewish model for worship derives. It is Chana's prayer – an act of transforming pain into performance – that serves as the *haftarah* (a reading following the Torah portion on Shabbat and holidays) for the first day of Rosh Hashana, arguably the most important day of the Jewish year. Jewish tradition recognizes Chana's bravery in being unapologetically herself, even when those around her thought she was delirious. In the Talmud, Rav Hamnuna states, "How many important *halachot* (laws) can be derived from these verses of the prayer of Chana?" (*Brachot* 31-1).

Reflecting on Roach's theoretical framework upon which this study draws – i.e. the concept of substituting the loss of an original – let us recall that the fit cannot be exact. It is precisely the process of auditioning stand-ins, substitutes that can never and will never fill the void of the original picture, that is the purpose. In Libby's case, she would probably argue that the very concept of an "original" in her own life is a myth, as her first marriage was so precarious to begin with. While she certainly practised the laws of *mikveh*, *shalom bayis*, and *Taharat HaMishpacha* (laws of family purity) with a full and genuine heart, in many ways they performed their own mis/matched picture, as they were executed against the backdrop of an unhappy marriage. But that enactment of a so-called perfect law to the score of an imperfect marriage culminated in her truest expression of authenticity: Libby's rebirth as a *rebbezin* and community leader.

My *tichel* was the last vestige of my married path, both my crown of splendour and my scarlet letter, my most visible Otherness and my security blanket. But, while it at times shamefully marked me as having gone astray, it also was my compass, showing me I was still tethered to my values, that I was living with authentic integrity.

Libby donned her signature *tichel*, her turban-like masterpiece, as a holy crown. Yet, though she wore her headscarf proudly, with her head high, those closest to her knew it was also a site of shame. If we are to connect this headscarf practice to Muñoz's theory of disidentification, Libby's *tichel* was her form of rebellion; by blinging out her headscarf, she leaned into the shame and magnified it, and in so doing turned against the symbolic system of which it was a part (Muñoz). Libby struggled with being marked, as anyone would. People judged. People laughed. Single men in our community wrote her off. Bigoted *yeshiva bochers* (single men who spend their days studying Talmud) mocked her with derogatory remarks, including slurs

comparing her to Muslim and Rastafarian people disparagingly. She experienced prejudice and discrimination on various accounts and chose to wear her headscarf regardless and because of it – a most supreme expression of disidentification.

On the flip side, many were in awe. Libby exhibited grandeur beyond her years. She was truly regal. People went quiet in her presence and rose when she entered a room. When she spoke, the silence that filled the space was thick. She captured the attention of those around her with just the slightest movement. Whatever *it* was – that, in the words of Roach, “easily perceived but hard-to-define quality possessed by abnormally interesting people” (Roach 1) – Libby had it.

Libby describes the tension she experienced between the two societal perceptions of her, which she attempted to squeeze into or break free of at various junctures.

I was forced to reorient myself, at times squeezing myself in, at times pulling myself out of the communities’ path-perception of womanhood. I was compelled to problematize many benchmarks, wondering how I could have been so naïve to think and so communally pressured to believe that all women can/should hit these marks at a specific time.

Libby contends with the liminality of the single orthodox Jewish woman living in Toronto today. Now remarried, she shares with me that she still feels conflicted by the either/or mentality of our *frum* community, and is drawn toward paradigms that are less dichotomous.

For me, even now that I am re-married, I often still struggle with my personal path down the narrow bridge and the implications the path itself has for women in my community. What’s our role in the in-between? How are we to navigate this liminal space, this off-the-bridge-ness, if we keep pretending it doesn’t exist? When I recently read the

biography of Sarah Schenirer, the visionary behind the Bais Yaakov movement, I was shocked by the fact that in some four-hundred pages, her divorce was not once mentioned (Benisch). The author chose to exclude that from her story. For it is, indeed, far more simple to applaud and perpetuate the idea of the balanced bridge-walking woman than see the marked nobility of those whose compass remains despite going off-course.

Quite the opposite of the biographer of Sarah Schenirer, Libby did not edit her divorce out of her story; she stationed it front-and-centre at the top of her head. It was, as she states so poetically, her crown and her scarlet letter, and necessarily so; like the matzah at the Passover *Seder*, Libby's *tichel* was a material representation of an ongoing tension, a catalyst that puts human beings in motion. It was the physical embodiment of the striving toward and the failure to meet at once. This is different from the processes of identification discussed previously. Striving toward removing *chametz* from one's house is still a form of bridge-walking. Libby's headscarf is a disidentification – at once walking on the bridge and gesturing to what is off the bridge. It is making explicit the failure that attends the normativity of Jewish practice. This action is not present in the same way with matzah rituals. Libby's *tichel* is a failure of a different order – a feminist kind of failure which is literalizing the failure that is implicit in Jewish tradition with the normative judgment that often governs it.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a woman who walks the bridge as well. I met Rebecca almost twenty years ago, when I was in high school and she was newly married. Over the years, I watched her story unfold and I witnessed how the self-exploration and work-life balance of which Liat spoke in theory can be realized in practice in the *frum* community, in spite of/ in relation to socio-religious pressures.

At the age of nineteen Rebecca married the boy next door. She was studying in a seminary in Jerusalem for the year after graduating from high school, and she (re)met her neighbour and family friend at a Shabbat table. They married shortly thereafter. She and her husband, at this point self-affiliated with the *Charedi* community, lived in an ultra-orthodox neighbourhood in Jerusalem for their first few years of marriage. As a young woman, I recall observing their courtship from afar with envy: in addition to being physically beautiful, their relationship seemed beautiful, too. They were young and in love and religious all at once – which was a novelty in my view. I had an impression that orthodox marriage was abstract and impersonal, but here was a specific, focused, consuming romantic love between two human beings.

I later learned from Rebecca that things were not so perfect, though at the time I was oblivious. I remember the day I found out about their separation: I was working a summer job in retail at a Judaica store, and Rebecca walked in with her mother and newborn daughter. While Rebecca had been out of touch, I had heard through the community grapevine that she and her husband had moved back to Toronto and she had had a baby. As she inquired about Jewish children's music, Rebecca mumbled under her breath, "It's about time my baby started listening to something other than Bob Dylan." I knew something was not right. I inquired about her husband, and she answered that he had left her. Her daughter was six-weeks-old.

Years later, I asked Rebecca to share with me some of her reflections from that time. Thirty-four years of age and living in Toronto at the time of this interview, Rebecca speaks to me for three hours. She states,

I remember standing at the CIBC ATM and bursting out crying. The woman behind me seemed a little concerned. I explained, "I'm sorry, it's just that have a three-month old

baby and my husband just left me.” She gave me a hug. “Oh my gosh,” I said, “I’ve just become that woman who cries to random strangers and hugs them.” “Well,” said the woman, “I’ve just become that woman who hugs you.” I remember meeting a friend at Blockbuster: “I’m getting divorced,” I blurted out. She assured me that the sting of the break-up, the shock, the I-can’t-live-another-moment-ness of it all would dissipate over time. She was right. (Rebecca, Interview, 2016)

I ask Rebecca how she got through it – how she mustered the strength to pick up the pieces. She said,

I had a six-month-old strapped to me in a BabyBjörn, I was sixty pounds overweight and I pretty much felt like a human hippo with a crying appendage. Lovely, right? ... I decided I didn’t want to be a victim. I just didn’t want to be “*ha’ miskeina*” [pathetic person]. This included taking responsibility for things instead of blaming other people – including my ex – for what had happened. A big part of this was asking myself: “How did I get here?” This is different than self-blame – this is choice and empowerment. Asking, “What is my part in this?” So even \*if\* he had screwed me over big time, what was my part? Well, for starters, it was over; so my part was that I was the one letting it still burn inside of me, I was the one choosing to brew, to be stuck. I was choosing to blame.

The stigma of being divorced in the *frum* community in the early 2000s, especially with a child, was fairly acute. I ask Rebecca how she navigated societal judgment and (mis)perceptions. Did she feel immediately Othered, I wonder? How did it feel to become an outsider overnight?

What other people thought about me? Well, that was none of my business. I have no right to be in someone else’s head – that’s their private space. I really tried to quit worrying

about what people were saying and thinking. Besides, whatever they wanted to dream up, at the end of the day, they were going back to their lives, and I was the only one who had to be with me at night when I put my head on my pillow. So I'd rather be the person I wanted to be – the person I know I am – than some dreamed-up judgement of a person in other peoples' estimation.

This carried Rebecca through the years as she gained an independent identity. Like Libby, she became a respected speaker and Torah scholar in the community. She spoke from the pulpit at local orthodox synagogues and contributed to reputable orthodox Jewish publications.

In Spite of, In-Between, and Through

It is no accident that many of the women presented in this chapter are outspoken public intellectuals and Torah scholars. These women have harnessed their unpopular choices (in some cases, including divorce) and have constructed powerful articulations of Jewish identity, which have arguably made an important contribution to building a modern orthodox community in Toronto. They literally embodied the journey of failure because they found a place in society in spite of the fact that they were unmarried. They played a double role in society, living out the paradox of (in)visibility, existing in the fore/background simultaneously. The paradox of being at once at the centre and in the margins of society can be played out in a variety of ways. The voices of the divorced and unmarried in Toronto reverberate from the walls of lecture halls and auditoriums – many deliver weekly *parsha shiurim* (Torah lessons on the weekly reading) and lectures on infertility and seminars on Jewish ethics. And yet, the social roles prescribed for these women remain tacit, implied but never stated, gestured toward but never integrated.

The Beckettian hat trick that is orthodox Jewish ritual choreography – the testing and trying out, the feeling and seeing, the contemplating and the critiquing – is central and essential

to performing orthodoxy. I have played and struggled with the hat trick all my life. It has been a site of personal anxiety as well as growth. Over time, I have lengthened and shortened, hemmed and unhemmed, buttoned and unbuttoned the collars of my clothing. I have put on the *sheitel* (wig) as well as many hats – berets and fedoras at synagogue, and many figurative hats as well, playing various roles as an orthodox (once married) woman – and have at various points taken them off. I have made symbolic alterations, adjusting and adapting to Jewish law before, during, and after my marriage, regarding *Taharat HaMishpacha*, *mikveh*, *tzniut*, and other forms of *halacha*. Ever since I received my *get*, I put my wig on when I leave the house and take it off when I get home. Perhaps that will change. Maybe, like Libby, I will find my own version of a *tichel* and wear it like a queen. I pray for the courage to wear my past like a crown, as she does – to say my prayer with my lips moving, no matter who is watching. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Saks writes that Moses, at the end of his life, gives the Israelites the final *mitzvah* (commandment): “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:1, *Complete Tanakh*). Rabbi Sacks teaches that this commandment is for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a *Sefer Torah* (a book of Torah) (Sacks).

I have learned and continue to learn through this ethnography what it means to perform Jewishly, to sing my song, to write a *Sefer Torah*. How to disidentify with religiosity in its traditional form – while paradoxically engaging ever-deeper in its *tradition*. That the failure to enact the law exactly can produce even more engagement with it; when the performance goes wrong, there is an opportunity to invest and to participate more mindfully. There is an opportunity to transform and enlarge the law rather than to reject it.

As previously stated, this chapter complicates the notion of failure set up in the previous chapters – the argument that ever-evolving efforts to perfect the law lead to meaningful ritual choreographies and ultimately to a kind of productive failure – falls short in this case. These women are marginalized for their singleness, which cannot exist in the same category as attempting to perfectly perform the *mikveh* or the Passover *Seder*. Over and against their ostracization, however, they have chosen to transform their suffering into sources of power. Many of these women have responded to being marginalized by creating platforms for scholarship, spaces for Torah learning, and new identities for themselves that embrace and integrate difference within orthodoxy.

## Conclusion

This dissertation was hard for me to write. My subject position influenced my approaches and limited my scope as a researcher. A large part of my ethnographic process was coming to terms with my own positionality, anxiety, and agency in my community. What would my conservative peers think of such a liberal research study? In some instances, I was too fearful to approach the individuals I felt would be most fitting as interviewees for this study, those who were most entrenched in *frum* society. As I indicate in the very first pages of this dissertation, this is a community in which I have always fought to belong. I felt vulnerable revealing the subject of my dissertation for fear of being perceived as heretical or an outlier. Ironically, while most orthodox folks agree that criticality is one of Judaism's central tenets, they still condemn those who judge the community harshly or unfavourably.

And I cared. I worried about being misperceived. I feared it would tarnish my chances for a *shidduch*. My insecurity influenced some of my methodological choices: to interview a disproportionate number of *Ba'alei Teshuva* (or a version of *Ba'alei Teshuva*, i.e. underwent a transition to a more stringent level of orthodoxy) relative to people who were F.F.B., *frum* from birth; to limit my selection of interviewees to those who subscribe to orthodox *halachic* systems of practice (as opposed to Conservative, Reform, Egalitarian, Reconstructionist, etc.); and, most fundamentally, to focus my study on the precise enactments of laws within these systems and not on their dismantlement or reconstitution.

Paradoxically (and true to *halachic* form), the narrowness of my subject matter – which was to research orthodox Jewish law in performance – is what allowed for my discovering its depth and nuance. I was not aware when I set out in my research that there was so much going on in the orthodox world. I was interested in the idea that it is impossible to perform *halacha*.

Gestures that appear to be miniscule, when viewed under a microscope – warts and all – can be understood more critically and contextually. As carefully as one would check a fabric for the mixture of wool and linen, I have examined the fibres of contemporary orthodoxy for *shatnez*, and what I have found within its finest fabric is contact between law and desire, God and the soul. That meeting place is a performance site that contains infinite possibilities.

As an orthodox feminist, I believe my research can be useful in understanding how to expand notions of freedom for women within a patriarchal rabbinic government. In a panel discussion about *Unorthodox* entitled “‘Unorthodox,’ Intimacy, and Accuracy: How Accurate is its Portrayal of Hasidic Intimacy?”, Diana Melnick says the following:

I always try to go with my client where they’re at. So, if I don’t know so much about Indian culture or African culture I might ask them to educate me on their cultural norms. And I ask them to guide me. I say, I can give you my advice or my perspective as a sex therapist, but I need to hear if it conflicts with your ideals or your values. And then I go into what I was trained to do... I’m always trying to tune into where it doesn’t sit well with them, where they would like a little bit more guidance... One of the things that I do often is I try to get involved in asking them to check with their rabbi or try to check with their person who is guiding them. Sometimes I’ll recommend something and they’ll say, “No, no, no, we were taught that you can absolutely never do that,” and I’ll say, “That’s interesting, why don’t you call up your rabbi and say... that your therapist suggests this... And I always offer to call up the rabbi personally because I find that when they’re hearing it straight from a “mental health professional,” it does definitely hold weight in terms of the way the *halacha* is *paskened* (legislated) for them. (55:24- 56:36)

This kind of “in-context” approach that Melnick outlines, one in which she encourages her clients to use the resources or channels available to them,<sup>29</sup> is so important when thinking about ethnography and how to conduct research within highly insular communities. I am really trying to promote this methodology in my dissertation – to exist inside cultural nuance for a moment in time and to find the possibilities within that codified framework, without breaking it apart. This modality can involve individuals of the same faith/culture/community working together to brainstorm, problem-solve, deconstruct. and imagine possibilities for each other using their respective skill-sets, in precisely the ways Melnick describes. She does not resist the norm to “Ask the rabbi,” but rather tries to utilize it to benefit her client.

Melnick continues this thought at another juncture in the panel discussion when speaking about ways to improve communication and sexual health among religious couples in Chassidic communities:

Realistically speaking, a *Chassidische* [Ashkenaz pronunciation of Chassidic] couple is not going to talk to each other [about sex] before the wedding... So, what we try to do is we have the *Kallah* (bride) teacher communicate directly with the *Chasson* (groom) *Rebbe* and advocate for our *Kallahs* (brides). And that’s the shift. We’re trying to get the teachers to advocate for their *Kallahs*. More than that, we try to get the *Kallah* teacher to read between the lines of what the *Kallah* is saying. [She] could be saying “No, no, [I’m] fine with [that]...” but she’s shaking and trembling, and you know she has anxiety, and that’s not O.K.... She might need an advocate. (48:19-48:55)

The shift to which Melnick refers is a gradual one that does not occur with the flick of a switch. It requires patience, empathy, understanding, a multi-disciplinary approach to orthodoxy, and

---

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that this “in context” approach should most definitely meet its limit when the client’s safety is at risk.

mobilizing resources for and within orthodox Jewish communities. Melnick takes this a step further:

If the *halacha* says there has to be *neshikah* [genital contact] before the woman becomes in *niddah*... otherwise they can't be in *yichud* [seclusion], then that's my box... I can try to make it as pleasant as possible, I can try to make it as empowering and as lovely as possible, but at the end of the day, as a *frum* Jew, I am going to want to stay in that box. (49:05-49:40)

It is unclear whether Melnick is referring to herself as a therapist or as a potential client in this scenario, but either way, I agree with her statement that there is a box that cannot be ignored. When and how and if an individual chooses to live in that box are important questions that most certainly should be asked of any community or religion; however, I do not think that cultural constraint and nuance can be denied in the process of helping, healing, and understanding.

I reflect upon the words of Stephanie Wellen Levine's ethnography of Hasidic Girls in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in her book *Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers*. Wellen Levine references Sue Wilkinson's article "Critical Connections: The Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development" as being deeply concerned with the "voice": "a person's idiosyncratic mode of expression that shares her feelings and ideas with others" (8). When outlining her methodology, she describes her subject position as an interviewer in somewhat voyeuristic terms: "It is a stunning exercise in empathy, in exploring the contours of another person's mind; this method perfectly suited my goal of capturing the girls' inner complexity" (8).

In the last decade, ethnographic methodologies have evolved from a voice-centred approach to a more voice-in-context approach, which I believe this dissertation extends. No longer are performance scholars interested merely in the voice; we are interested, instead, in how

these voices coexist and express with and around social orders and power structures, both conscious and not. In this context, the present study is especially fruitful: it situates the voices of orthodox men and women within a larger framework of religious law and explains how their experiences correspond with its legislative structure. It explores how particular relationships between written and oral law can establish choreographies that deliberately set a person up to fail and how moments of socio-cultural spirituality transpire as a result.

I hope that my study of the quiet<sup>30</sup>, conscious, sometimes micro-performances that exist between the letter of the law and the hopes of what that law might or could fulfil – and the elaborate, messy, fumbling choreographies that swirl around and between these acts – can offer an in-context approach to cultural and performance studies that puts pressure on ethnographies and research practices that do not respect “the box.” The individuals in this dissertation and in my community keep going, in-spite-of, in between, and through the confines of the ritual system, and I feel it is my job to pay attention.

Future research questions I intend to address but that extend beyond the limitations of this dissertation include, How do rabbinic power structures respond to and participate in a religious system that is set up to fail? How does rabbinic textuality promote a legal structure that is discursively practised and/yet necessarily impossible? What additional possibilities arise from such a structure that exceed beyond socio-cultural and domestic realms? How can we analyse and learn from the feminist gestures and actions of orthodox Jewish women<sup>31</sup> that literalize and

---

<sup>30</sup> Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston’s article, “quiet theater: The Radical Politics of Silence,” explores how, in her fieldwork, the “silence... that engulfed the interlocutor-ethnographer interactions” led to a form of radical empathy (410). Her methodological approach, which uses “contextually specific particularity” to work through story-telling and affect is extremely useful to the present study.

<sup>31</sup> I hope to continue my involvement on the Canadian Yoatzot Initiative committee and am excited by the new possibilities for orthodox Jewish women emerging from this organization and others that promote regulated (organizationally, not rabbinically) orthodox female leadership.

make explicit ritual within the tightly knit structure of religious commandment? I intend to further investigate themes around cultural history, ritual as muscle memory, and Jewish gendered ritual as a central site of (re)learning. My hope is that this project serves as a point of entry to more in depth investigations of rabbinic law as a significant site of performativity and points to new methodological, socio-spiritual, and paradigmatic possibilities in performance studies and beyond.

## Works Cited

- Abramov, Tehilla. *The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Insights into the Practice of Taharat Hamishpacha*. Targum Press, 1988.
- Adler, Rachel. "Tum'ah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings." (*First*) *Jewish Catalogue*, no. 1, 1973.
- Adler, Rachel. "In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity." *Tikkun*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1993.
- Ahmed, Sarah. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." *borderlands e-journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/ahmed\\_declarations.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm).
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, 1970.
- Auslander, Shalom. *Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir*. Riverheard Books, 2008.
- Avishai, Orit. "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency." *Gender and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2008.
- Baker, Adrienne. *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1993.
- Baskin, Elizabeth. *The Community Mikveh: An Invention of Tradition*. 2012, Brandeis University. Masters thesis.
- Benisch, Pearl. *Carry Me in Your Heart: The Life and Legacy of Sarah Schenirer, Founder and Visionary of the Bais Yaakov Movement*. Feldheim, 2003.
- Bensoussan, Yossi. "Shidduch Crisis." *Mishpacha: Jewish Family Weekly*, 2020
- Berger, Peter L. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. Anchor 1963.
- Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. NYU P, 2011.
- Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*. U of Michigan P, 2005.
- Biale, Rachel. *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today*. Revised ed., Schocken, 1995.

- Blumenkrantz, Avrohom. *The Laws of Pesach*. Bais, 2006.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. U of California P, 1997.
- Boyarin, Jonathan. *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Summer on the Lower East Side*. Fordham UP, 2011.
- Brettschneider, Marla. *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*. SUNY P, 2016.
- Buber, Martin. "Distance and Relation." *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue*, edited by Judith Buber Agassi, Syracuse UP, 1999.
- . *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Free Press, 1923.
- Burshtein, Rama, scriptwriter and director. *Fill the Void*. Reshet Broadcasting, 2012.
- , scriptwriter and director. *The Wedding Plan*. Norma Productions, 2016.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Psychology Press, 1993.
- Bunin Benor, Sarah. *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Calderisi, Robert. "Religious-Symbols Ban is an Expression - and Betrayal - of Quebec's Values." *The Globe and Mail*, 2 Apr. 2019.
- Chapman, Tracy. *Telling Stories*. Elektra, 2000.
- Chizhik-Goldschmidt, Avital. "The "Shidduch Crisis" Has Led to an Orthodox Obsession with Female Beauty." *Forward*, 2015.
- . "What Happens When Thousands of 'Shidduch Résumés are Leaked?" *Forward*, 2019.
- Cohen, Debra Nussbaum. "In New York, Women Forge a New Path to the Mikveh." *Haaretz*, 2016.
- Dar, Gidi. "Ushpizin." Picture House, 2004.
- Davis, Judith. "The Bar Mitzvah Balabusta: Mother's Role in the Family's Rite of Passage." *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*, edited by Maurie Sacks, U of Illinois P, 1995, pp. 125–41.
- Davis, Menachem, Nosson Scherman, Meir Zlotowitz, Yaakov Blinder, and Sheah Brander, *Pirkei Avos: Ethics of Our Fathers*. Mesorah Publications, 2002.

- Davis-Fisch, Heather. "Girls in 'White' Dresses, Pretend Fathers: Interracial Sexuality and Intercultural Community in the Canadian Arctic." *Theatre Research in Canada*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2011.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 1966.
- Eliyahu, Mordechai. *Hilchot Chagim: Laws and Customs of the Jewish Year*. Feldheim, 2008.
- Ewing, Heidi, and Rachel Grady, directors. *One of Us*. Loci Films, 2017.
- Elon, Ori and Yehonatan Indursky. "Episode 2." *Shtisel: Season 1*.
- Feigenbaum, Rabbi Yitzchok. "Been There, Done That: Why Being Frum Is So Boring." *The Klal Perspectives Journal: A Forum for Discussion of Challenges Facing the Torah Community*, 2012.
- Fine, Steven. "How Do You Know a Jew When You See One? Reflections on Jewish Costume in the Modern World." *Fashioning Jews: Clothing, Culture and Commerce*, edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon, Purdue UP, 2013, pp. 19–28.
- Fletcher, Yehudis, Melnick, Diana and Schapiro-Halberstam, Sara, panelists. Panel discussion. *Intimate Judaism*, 26 Apr. 2020.
- Forst, Binyomin. *A Woman's Guide to the Laws of Niddah*. ArtScroll Mesorah, 1999.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Editions Gallimard, 1984.
- . *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard, Pantheon, 1961.
- Fraiman, Michael. "Hit Israeli Play to Make Canadian Stage Debut in Toronto." *Canadian Jewish News*, 8 Apr. 2018.
- Fram, Edward. *My Dear Daughter: Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education of Jewish Women in Sixteenth-Century Poland*. Hebrew Union College P, 2007.
- Fram, Edward. Introduction. *My Dear Daughter: Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education of Jewish Women in Sixteenth-Century Poland*. Hebrew Union College Press, 2007.
- Friedman, Jonathan. *Rainbow Jews: Jewish and Gay Identity in the Performing Arts*. Lexington Books, 2007.
- Friedman, Joseph. *The Inside Story: Biblical Personalities*. Hamilton Books, 2016.

- Gladstone, Bill. "A Study of Toronto's Orthodox Jews." *Bill Gladstone Genealogy*. 25 Oct. 2011
- Glesne, Corrine. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. Pearson, 1992.
- Goldberg, Daveeda. *The Semiotic Reasoning of Orthodox Judaism: The Rule of Law and the Practice of Gender in Modern Jewish Marriage*. 2005, York University. Masters Thesis.
- Gorden, Caryn. "Eating Disorders in the Orthodox Jewish Community." *Psychology Today*, 2015.
- Gould, Jillian. *Heimish and Home-Ish: Aging, Jewishness and the Creation of Home at a Toronto Assisted-Living Residence, the Terraces of Baycrest*. 2009, Memorial University. Ph.D. dissertation.
- Grossman, Rabbi Susan. "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Being Created Human." *The Committee of Jewish Law and Standards*, Rabbinic Assembly, 2006.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, MIT P, 1962.
- Hand, Richard J. *The Theatre of Joseph Conrad: Reconstructed Fictions*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Hauptman, Judith. "Feminist Perspectives on Religious Texts." *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, edited by Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, Yale UP, 1994.
- Heilman, Samuel. *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*. U of California P, 1992.
- Hendler, Daniel, Alexa Karolinski and Anna Winger. "Part 1." *Unorthodox* (miniseries).
- . "Part 2." *Unorthodox* (miniseries).
- . "Part 4." *Unorthodox* (miniseries).
- Hirsch, Sampson Raphael. *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*. Vol. 1, Soncino Press, 1968.
- Hirsch, Sampson Raphael. Introduction. *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*. Vol. 1, Soncino Press, 1968.
- Hoffman, Warren. *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture*. Syracuse U P, 2009.
- Holden, Stephen. "Guess Who is Coming for Sukkot? Unbelievers." *The New York Times*, Arts, 9 Oct. 2005.

- Hopflinger, A.K. "Clothing as a Meaningful Marker of Space: A Comparative Approach to Embodied Religion from a Cultural Studies Perspective." *Religious Representations in Place*, edited by M.K. George and D. Pezzoli-Olgiati. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Joffe, Lisa Fishbayn and Sylvia Neil. *Gender, Religion, and Family Law: Theorizing Conflicts Between Women's Rights and Cultural Traditions*. UPNE, 2013.
- Jones, Amelia. "'Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1995.
- Joseph, Norma. "Civil Jurisdiction and Religious Accord: Bruker v. Marcovitz in the Supreme Court of Canada." *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2011.
- Jung, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton UP, 1980.
- Kaplan, Aryeh. *Tzitzith: A Thread of Light*. Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1993.
- Kay, Barbara. "Why Jews Should Support Bill 21." *The Canadian Jewish News*, 25 Apr. 2019.
- Kayfetz, Ben. "The Development of the Toronto Jewish Community." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol.13, no.1, 1972.
- Kazubowski-Houston, Magdalena. "quiet theater: The Radical Politics of Silence." *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2018.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Penguin, 1843.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. U of California P, 1998.
- . "The Moral Sublime: Jewish Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century America." *Writing a Modern Jewish History*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al., Yale UP, 2006.
- Kitov, Eliyahu. *The Book of Our Heritage: The Jewish Year and Its Days of Significance*. Feldheim, 1997.
- Kopstick, Moshe. "Kopshtick's Chanuka Rock Singalong." Revaya Productions, December 18, 2016.
- Kurshan, Ilana. *If All the Seas Were Ink*. St. Martin's Press, 2017.
- Lamm, Norman. *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*. Feldheim, 1966.

- Levin, Laura. *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Levin, Laura. Personal Interview. 12 November 2013.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by Sean Hand, Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Levine, Stephanie Wellen. *Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls*. NYU P, 2004.
- Lungen, Paul. "Will the Jewish Community Increasingly Reflect an Orthodox Agenda?" *Canadian Jewish News*, 18 May. 2017.
- Machtinger, Yael C.B.. *A Socio-Legal Investigation of 'Get' Jewish Divorce Refusal in New York and Toronto: Agunot Unstitching the Ties that Bind*. 2017, York University. Ph.D. dissertation.
- . Yael C. B.. "The Communal Blight of Get-Refusal." *The Canadian Jewish News*, 2020.
- Madison, D. Soyini. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Sage Publications, 2005.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* Princeton UP, 2004.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Mechilta, Beshalach 5; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 42; Exodus Rabbah 13; and others
- Milevsky, Avidan, Deborah Shifra Niman, Atara Raab and Ruchie Gross. "A Phenomenological Examination of Dating Attitudes in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Emerging Adult Women." *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2011.
- Miller, Jonathan. "A Jew Walks into a Bar." 2016.
- Newman, Bailey. "The Hat in the Mirror." *Biladye*: 21 Aug. 2014.  
<https://biladye.wordpress.com/2014/08/21/parshat-reeh/>
- Penkower, Ariel Y. "The Culture of Dating and Single Life in the Modern Orthodox Jewish Community: A Qualitative Study." 2010, Rutgers University. Ph.D. dissertation.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*. Routledge, 1993.
- Prombaum, Simcha. "Hineini: 'Here I Am' and 'I Am Here' are Different." *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, 2014.

- Rayner, Alice. *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia UP, 1996.
- , *It*. University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Reichman, Shmuel. "The Relationship Between Yaakov and Esav that Could Have Been." *The Chicago Jewish Home*, 2019.
- Roethe, Anna L. "Visual Narratives of Medical Imaging and Intervention Technologies, and the Popular Viscourse." *Handbook of Popular Culture and Biomedicine: Knowledge in the Life Sciences as Cultural Artifact*, edited by A Görgen, G.A. Nunez, H. Fangerau, Springer, 2018.
- Rockman, Hannah. "Matchmaker Matchmaker Make Me a Match: the Art and Conventions of Jewish Arranged Marriages." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, vol. 9, no. 3. 1994, pp. 277-284.
- Rosenbaum, Baila. "Up to Date." *Mishpacha: Jewish Family Weekly*, 2019.
- Ross, Selena. "Why Sex Abuse Charges Against a Toronto Teacher Took 20 Years to Reach Court." *The Globe and Mail*, 20 May. 2016.
- Rossen, Rebecca. "Hasidic Drag: Jewishness and Transvestism in the Modern Dances of Pauline Koner and Hadassah." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011.
- . "The Jewish Man and his Dancing Schtick." *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*. Oxford Scholarship, 2014.
- Sacks, Jonathan. "The Torah as God's Song." *Covenant and Conversation*, 2020.
- Sacks, Maurie. "Mishloach Manot: The Real Impact of Women's Symbolic Power." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, vol. 9, no. 1/2, 1987.
- Sash, Adina Miles. "Orthodox Jewish Influencer Adina Miles on Empowering Women in Her Community." *Now This*: 15 Nov. 2018.
- Sarick, Lila. "Modern Orthodoxy at the Crossroads." *The Canadian Jewish News*, 16 Nov 2016.
- Scott, Marian. "Sex Abuse Issue Emerging in Orthodox Jewish Community." *National Post*, 26 Jul. 2011.
- Sherman, Batsheva. "Marriage." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. Jewish Women's Archive, 2009.

- Schmitz, Andrew, and Menachem Feuer. "Hup! Hup! We Must Tumble: Toward an Ethical Reading of the Schlemiel." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2008.
- Schwartz, Shira. "Performing Jewish Sexuality." *Performing Religion in Public*, edited by J. Edelman, C. Chambers, and S. du Toit, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Shor, Eran. "Contested Masculinities: The New Jew and the Construction of Black and Palestinian Athletes in Israeli Media." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2008.
- Silverman, Eric. *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Soloveitchik, Rabbi Haym. "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy." *Tradition*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, pp. 64–130.
- Sternbuch, Gutta. *Memories of a Vanished World: a Bais Yaakov Teacher's Poignant Account of the War Years, With a Historical Overview*. Feldheim, 2005.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Tsuria, Ruth. "Jewish Q&A Online and the Regulation of Sexuality: Using Foucault to Read Technology." *Social Media and Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*. PAJ Publications, 1982.
- Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002.
- Weinberger, Rabbi Moshe. "Been There, Done That: Why Being Frum Is So Boring." *The Klal Perspectives Journal: A Forum for Discussion of Challenges Facing the Torah Community*, 2012.
- Weinstein, Joshua Z., director of photography. *Menashe*. Mongrel Media, 28 July 2017.
- Weiser, Natalie Deborah. *Becoming an Observant Jewish Woman: Process, Practice, and Performance*. 2007, York University. Ph.D. dissertation.
- Wilkinson, Sue. "Critical Connections: The Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development." *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1994.
- Zilberman, Alan. "'Menashe' Looks, with Tenderness and Equanimity, at the Hasidic Community in Brooklyn." *The Washington Post*, 10 Aug. 2017.

## Appendix: List of Open Questions

### General:

1. How would you describe your religious background?
2. How do you identify religiously now?
3. Can you tell me about your family?
4. What were the values of your family growing up? Are these still important to you?
5. Is there a discrepancy between what you were taught to do religiously and what you do now?
6. Do you attend *shul* [synagogue]? Which one and why?
7. Can you tell me about what you do professionally, if you work?
8. Do you enjoy your Jewish practice? If so, which parts?
9. Does Jewish ritual ever make you feel uncomfortable? Can you tell me about that?

### *Mikveh*:

10. Can you describe what typical *mikveh* excursion looks like for you? Can you take me through the steps, the preparation process, and the actual event?
11. Can you tell me what it's like for you to perform this *mitzvah*?
12. Was the *mikveh* explained to you before you got married? What was your previous knowledge and how did you acquire it?
13. Were you raised with a consciousness of this *mitzvah*?
14. Have you ever experienced physical or emotional challenges when preparing for the *mikveh*? If so, do you feel comfortable sharing them?
15. Do you ever feel a complexity or a tension when performing this *mitzvah*? If so, how?

16. Has it ever been difficult for you to go to the *mikveh*? Can you tell me about that?
17. What is your state of mind when you go to the *mikveh*? Does it change or is it relatively consistent? What does your mental/ emotional state depend on?
18. Do you enjoy going to the *mikveh*? What aspects do you enjoy or not enjoy?
19. Does your experience at the *mikveh* influence or change your relationship with your husband? Can you tell me about that?
20. Does your relationship with your husband influence or change your experience at the *mikveh*? Can you tell me about that?
21. Do you ever dread going to the *mikveh*? If so, what is that like?
22. Do you talk about the *mikveh* with others? What is said and what is not said?
23. What do you do throughout the month in relation to the *mikveh* and *Taharat HaMishpacha*? How do you feel about doing these things?
24. How does going to the *mikveh* make you feel? How do *mikveh* preparations make you feel?

*Pesach*:

25. Can you walk me through your *Pesach* preparations, step by step?
26. Can you tell me about your state of mind in the days leading up to *Pesach*?
27. What does your *Pesach* holiday look like?
28. What do you do beforehand in preparation for these events?
29. What is expected of you before, during, and after *Pesach*? Do you have any help?
30. Do you have any tips for *Pesach* cleaning? Can you tell me about them?
31. Have you ever had a *chametz* scare during *Pesach*? Can you tell me about that?

32. How do *Pesach* preparations make you feel?

33. Do you experience stress or anxiety during or before *Pesach*? Can you tell me about that?

Vestimentary:

34. What kinds of clothes do you wear?

35. Does your dress and/or physical appearance reflect your Judaism? If so, how?

36. How does your dress or physical appearance reflect your spiritual beliefs?

37. Are you conscious of the way you are being perceived when wearing Jewish objects, like a *kippah*, *tzitzit*, etc.? Can you tell me about that?

38. What went or goes into your decision to wear or not to wear Jewish clothing?

39. What do you think of when you hear the word “masculinity”?

40. What do you think of when you hear the words “Jewish man”?

41. What does masculinity mean to you?

42. What is your relationship with gender?

43. Is dressing Jewishly important to you? Why or why not? Has this ever changed?

44. Have you ever had a positive or a negative experience with someone’s perception of you, specifically regarding “looking Jewish”?

45. Does dressing Jewishly affect your state of mind or the way you think, feel, or behave?

Can you tell me about that?

46. Have you ever struggled with what to wear? Can you tell me about that?

47. How do the Jewish objects or clothes you wear make you feel?

*Shidduchim:*

48. What are your thoughts on *shidduch* dating as a system?
49. Can you tell me about some of your experiences *shidduch* dating?
50. Have you heard of the term “The *Shidduch* Crisis”? What does it mean to you?
51. Do you benefit from the *shidduch* system? Can you tell me about that?
52. Does the *shidduch* system have negative aspects? Can you tell me about that?
53. How did you begin participating in this system?
54. Do you ever want to stop participating in this system? Have you ever stopped? Do you feel constraints keeping you within it?
55. Do you feel pressure to get married?
56. How do you feel as an unmarried person in this community?
57. How are you treated as an unmarried person in this community?
58. How do you spend your time?
59. Do participate in religious activities? Do you feel inhibited in your community by your single status?
60. What is your relationship with the word “Single”? What are your connotations with that word?
61. Do you enjoy “Being Single”? Can you tell me about that?
62. What is your relationship to gender?
63. Do you feel a sense of community? Can you tell me about that?
64. Does the word “belonging” resonate with you? What does it mean to you?
65. What is your relationship to clothing? Do you think about what you wear in the relationship to your community?

66. Does your relationship to clothing or physical appearance relate to your identity and/or single status? Can you tell me about that?

67. Have you ever felt mistreated in the orthodox community? If so, how?

68. Have you ever felt misunderstood in the orthodox community? If so, how?

69. Is your divorce (if applicable) a part of your identity? If so, how? If not, can you tell me about that?