

THE JOFA Journal

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

A BIGGER TENT

By Bat Sheva Marcus

In *Bereishit* 12:5 we read the description of God's call to Avram to leave Haran, the land in which he had built his home, and travel to an unspecified destination. Avram took along his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, their possessions, and "*hanefesh asher asu b'Haran*." It is a striking phrase: "the souls they had created in Haran." Rashi suggests that it refers to servants they had acquired or to individuals whom they had converted. This notion—that an individual whom you bring into the Jewish faith is a soul you have created—is pretty radical. In the Talmud, Reish Lakish takes the idea even further when he states that anyone who teaches Torah to the child of another is considered the creator of that child (perhaps another parent?).

One of the things that always struck me about this story is the way that it fits in with the fact that Avraham and Sarah could not have children for so many years. It doesn't seem to be too much of a stretch to suggest that this is how they responded to their inability to have children. Rather than isolate themselves, they opened their tent on all four sides to bring in others. Perhaps the



fact that Avraham and Sarah could not have children is what forced them to look outside the traditional way of creating a family. It spurred them to reach out, to try to create a different type of family for themselves. In the process, they not only addressed their personal problem, but they also were able to lessen other people's loneliness, isolation, and disconnection.

This feels like an approach many of us can relate to. How many of us, when faced with a new stage of life, attempt to build a new family for ourselves? Some of us do it because we've moved to a new place where we have no connections. Some of us do it because we are facing infertility when all our friends are having children. Some of us do it because our lifestyle choices are at odds with our family or our community. Anyone who knows me personally knows how much I mourned my children's (healthy and normal) departure from our day-to-day lives when they left home. One solution for me has been to reach out to friends and create a part-time family for us with other people's children included in it.

For generations, the Orthodox community has had one definition of family that worked well for most people. It consisted of a mother, a father, sometimes a grandparent,

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Changing Personal and Family Choices in Contemporary Orthodox Lives

By Sylvia Barack Fishman

Modern Orthodoxy can be thought of as a broad continuum that runs from "centrist" near-yeshivish Orthodox on the right to "Open" Orthodox on the left. Across that continuum, Modern Orthodox Jews observe—and some experience—the changing gender roles and gender fluidity, non-marital sexuality, late marriage, non-marriage, intermarriage, and related transformations occurring throughout American society, as recent Pew Research Center studies show.¹

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/08/26/a-portrait-of-american-orthodox-jews/>.

American Modern Orthodox Jews today live in a different America than the one they remember from their childhoods. It is helpful to look back at how much—and why—things have changed. In the 1950s and early 1960s, American Jews, like their non-Jewish counterparts, were influenced by societal celebration of earlier marriage and larger families. Half of American Jewish women married by the time they were 21, and they gave birth to an average of about three children. Middle-class American Jews also shared American bourgeois gender role construction and sexual expectations circa 1955. As Herman Wouk mused

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Editor's Note

Given that inclusion is the theme of this issue, I wish to introduce a new member of the *JOFA Journal* editorial team, who will help us better include the perspectives of a new generation of Orthodox Jewish feminists. Leah Sarna, a fourth-year student at Yeshivat Maharat and a former Wexner Graduate Fellow and a clergy intern at Harvard Hillel, is joining me as co-editor of the journal, beginning with this issue. We welcome her and look forward to her bringing fresh perspectives to our publication.

Roselyn Bell
Co-editor, *JOFA Journal*

THE JOFA Journal

A Publication of the
Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance
Volume XV, Issue 1
Fall 2017 – Heshvan 5778

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The JOFA Journal is published by the
Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, a 501(c)(3) organization.

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and children of varying ages. But that definition is not an inviting definition. There are many whom this definition cuts out of the community: widows and widowers, women or men who have not found someone with whom they would want to share their life, people who do not choose to share their life with anyone else, those who have dissolved a marriage that was painful, gays and lesbians, single mothers by choice.

Avraham and Sarah's story is a strong reminder of another approach, of what openness, inclusiveness, and welcome can look like. Sadly, these are too often lacking in the Orthodox community. I recently heard a phrase that I loved: the "frozen chosen," referring to people who, while seeing themselves as uniquely chosen to serve God and do His will, stay isolated in a cold identity that freezes others out. This illustrates the dichotomy between

the Avrahams and Sarahs, who warmly invite in any who want to be a part of the group, and those who, no matter how devout, still develop intractable rules of engagement meant to keep people out.

Ultimately, however a family is composed, it must be something that allows us to bask in the connections and commitments of shared history, shared values, or just shared blood. A family, whether conventional or not, must provide us with a support system, a cheering squad, and something bigger than ourselves on which to focus.

This issue of the *JOFA Journal*, with a variety of scenarios, tries to imagine a wider, bigger tent for all kinds of families. Ultimately, if we can make them all feel welcomed, loved, and cared for, the entire Jewish community will benefit.

Changing Personal and Family Choices

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in his 1955 novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, "Twentieth century or not, good Jewish girls were supposed to be virgins when they got married. ... For that matter, good Christian girls were supposed to be virgins too; that was why brides wore white."² Embedded in a widespread middle-class social-sexual norm,³ even Modern Orthodox Jews, for the most part, paid scant attention to rabbinical discouragement of premarital physical contact; indeed, some Modern Orthodox synagogues famously sponsored social events with ballroom dancing.

Attitudes toward sexuality, love, and marriage were palpably transformed in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, when social and political upheavals were precipitated by the Vietnam War and the American civil rights movement. Critiques of conventional marriage and family life were in the air.⁴ Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)⁵ and feminist commentary on women's lives and choices raised the consciousness of middle-class women. Significantly, Jewish women were prominent among the leaders and active laity of American second-wave feminism.

Not least, male and female "liberation" movements drew strength from the increasingly easy availability of birth control, especially the "pill." The de facto biological separation between sexual activity and reproduction in 1970s America had a profound impact on the life choices of individual men and women.⁶ As many have noted, the relationship between love, heterosexual marriage, and

parenthood ceased to be inextricably "united socially, morally, and legally," challenging the "sense of order and predictability" that used to be associated with conventional "organized domestic life."⁷

Economic factors also profoundly affected attitudes and behaviors toward sexuality and courtship in the 1960s and 1970s. As the gender gap between men's and women's educational levels and earning potential decreased for well-educated middle- and upper-middle-class Americans (the socioeconomic groups among whom American Jews were increasingly found), women had more control over their personal lives and could make reliable commitments to careers. Economic pressure made those careers desirable for their families.

Contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews and Their Personal Choices

American Jewish men and women today have different life expectations than they did 50 years ago. Today, almost three-quarters (74 percent) of American Jewish men and 43 percent of American Jewish women ages 25 to 34 are not married, according to the recent Pew research study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*.⁸ Today, Jewish men achieve a 90 percent ever-married rate (persons who have been married at some time, even if they are currently widowed or divorced) only at age 45, and Jewish women when they are over age 50,⁹ whereas in the 1950s and early 1960s American Jews achieved near "universal marriage" (a term to indicate that 95 percent of the population is married) around

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² Herman Wouk, *Marjorie Morningstar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), pp. 228–30.

³ Michael Broyde, "Hair Covering and Jewish Law: Biblical and Objective or Rabbinical and Subjective," *Tradition* 42:3 (Fall 2009).

⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984).

⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).

⁶ Lionel Tiger, *The Decline of Males: The First Look at an Unexpected New World for Men and Women* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 162.

⁷ Steven L. Nock, "The Divorce of Marriage and Parenthood," *Journal of Family Therapy* 22: 245–63 (2000).

⁸ Lugo, Cooperman, Smith, et al., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* (October 1, 2013). Cited in Parmer, Table 2, Marital Status of American Jewish Adults by Age and Gender, Pew results re-percentage.

⁹ Harriet Hartman and Moshe Hartman, *Gender and American Jews: Patterns in Work, Education, and Family in Contemporary Jewish Life* (Waltham, MA: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2009), p. 29.

Changing Personal and Family Choices

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age 30. Even men and women who eventually marry often significantly delay the five social characteristics of adulthood: completion of schooling or training, financial independence, marriage, parenthood, and independent living arrangements.

Although many—but not all—Orthodox Jews marry earlier than non-Orthodox Jews, outside of the *haredi* world, marriage and childbearing typically take place later today among Modern Orthodox Jews than they did decades ago. Pew showed three-quarters of *haredi* Jews and nearly half (48 percent) of Modern Orthodox Jews married by age 24, and almost all *haredim* and 70 percent of Modern Orthodox Jews married by age 29. But for the one-third of Modern Orthodox Jews who do not marry in their twenties, singlehood can extend through the thirties and into the forties.

Most unmarried American Jewish adults in their twenties and beyond are sexually active, and many cohabit for at least some period in their lives. Some Modern Orthodox singles have continued to maintain the earlier common American middle-class pattern of expressing some physical affection but stopping short of sexual intercourse in premarital dating situations. Some Modern Orthodox Jews abide by the principles of being *shomer negiah* (avoiding all physical contact before marriage). Many observers of American Jews believe that the emphasis on and observance of *shomer negiah* is far higher now than it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. Other Modern Orthodox singles are sexually active; Pew data indicate Orthodox singles' cohabitation rates are similar to those of non-Orthodox Jewish singles when they reach their thirties and forties. (Of course, there are many fewer Orthodox Jews, and many fewer Orthodox singles than non-Orthodox Jews and singles, so absolute numbers of cohabiting Orthodox Jews are much lower than those of non-Orthodox Jews.)

Modern Orthodox Families and Fertility

Interestingly, the fertility rate of Modern Orthodox Jews today is similar to what it was decades ago—although the gap between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews has widened dramatically since the 1950s and 1960s, when 2.8 children was the national American Jewish average. The Pew Orthodox *Portrait* shows that Orthodox Jews overall have more children than non-Orthodox Jews: “Orthodox Jewish respondents ages 40–59 have had an average of 4.1 children in their lifetime, compared with an average of 1.7 born to all other U.S. Jews in that group (a measure known as ‘completed fertility’)” (p. 9). However, fertility rates among American Orthodox Jews span a broad continuum of behaviors. Modern Orthodox Jews are significantly influenced by American economic, political, and social attitudes and conditions. For example, the *Jewish Community Study of New York, 2011* showed that hasidic families averaged 5.8 children, “yeshivish” Orthodox 5 children, and Modern Orthodox Jews 2.5 children.¹⁰

The lifestyle that has become normative in American Modern Orthodoxy features marriage in the twenties, high levels of education, prestigious careers, and raising Jewishly educated children above a demographic replacement level. Many believe that Modern Orthodox birth rates are affected not only by the high cost of Jewish day school and Jewish summer camp tuitions—a norm among many Modern Orthodox communities—but also arguably by American aspirations to give each child access to prestigious college and post-college training. In comparison, partly because of Israel's pronounced pro-natalist societal environment and lack of emphasis on expensive post-high school education, even *hiloni* (secular) families in Israel average 2.7 children¹¹—more than New York's Modern Orthodox families.

Gender Gap Declines in Modern Orthodox Educational and Occupational Patterns

While the marriage and fertility gaps between Modern Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox Jews have widened, the secular educational gap has virtually disappeared. Some readers may be surprised that Modern Orthodox Jews have higher levels of post-high school education than any other wing of American Judaism. Thus, the Pew Orthodox *Portrait* tables reveal that 36 percent of Modern Orthodox Jews, 32 percent of Conservative Jews, 31 percent of Reform Jews, and 31 percent with no denomination have B.A. degrees. About equal percentages (29–30 percent) of each have post-B.A. degrees. American Modern Orthodox lifestyles have responded to economic trends, resulting in escalating Jewish and secular education for women and high levels of female labor force participation, even among married women with children under age six at home, as Harriet and Moshe Hartman and others have shown.¹² Modern Orthodox couples experience the most spousal homogamy—educational and occupational equality—the Hartmans found, working with NJPS 2000–01 data.¹³ The *Pew Profile* (2013) similarly revealed that Modern Orthodox Jews had the highest levels of secular education and occupational achievement and the highest household income level, startling facts taken together with their relatively high fertility rates.¹⁴ Even though it may feel like a daily struggle, numerous Modern Orthodox American two-career families with children successfully manage the work–children–Jewish life juggling act.

Gender Nonconformity in the Modern Orthodox World

The increasing prominence of LGBTQ Jewish families

¹⁰ Steven M. Cohen, Jacob Ukeles, and Ron Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011, Comprehensive Report* (UJA Federation of New York, September 2012).

¹¹ Sergio DellaPergola, “View from a Different Planet: Fertility Attitudes, Performances, and Policies among Jewish Israelis,” in Sylvia Barack Fishman, ed., *Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), pp. 123–50.

¹² Hartman and Hartman, *Gender and American Jews*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

¹⁴ Pew, 2013, p. 43.

is a striking characteristic of contemporary American Jewish communities, including Modern Orthodox communities. Today, about 7 percent of American Jews identify as LGBTQ. Almost a third of self-reported LGBTQ Jews are married or partnered, and another 9 percent are raising their own children.¹⁵ Only 38 percent of Modern Orthodox Jews agreed with the statement that “homosexuality should be discouraged.”

But the increased prominence of observant homosexual Jews poses a challenge to Orthodox institutions and authorities, many of whom officially posit that open LGBTQ behavior is contrary to biblical and Jewish law. Some Orthodox rabbis have articulated the idea that homosexuality is a “choice,” and thus can be avoided through willpower, motivation, and medication—despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. LGBTQ Orthodox Jews often report feeling rebuffed by Orthodox institutions and sometimes by Orthodox rabbis. However, other Orthodox voices have urged a more realistic and compassionate approach. In recent years, a number of programs and events under Modern Orthodox auspices have made it clear that laypersons among Orthodox practitioners often feel more connected to their LGBTQ co-religionists than might be apparent from official platforms,¹⁶ and some Orthodox day schools are also beginning to accommodate LGBTQ families.

Intermarriage in Modern Orthodox Life

Even though intermarriage rates are much lower among Modern Orthodox Jews than among non-Orthodox Jews,¹⁷ many Modern Orthodox families experience intermarriage somewhere within their extended family. In Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox homes, social environment and Jewish educational experiences affect the likelihood of intermarriage. For example, having two Jewish parents, having two Orthodox parents, and having parents who have not divorced are all highly correlated with children growing up to marry other Jews. The adult children least likely to intermarry have grown up living in a “Jewish” neighborhood (population density), have attended Jewish schools through their teen years, have had mostly Jewish friends in high school, and have had Jewish experiences during college, such as attending Jewish studies classes, working in a Jewish summer camp, and visiting Israel. A research report by Steven M. Cohen and me, recently published by the

Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI),¹⁸ shows that the experiences most predictive of higher in-marriage are day school attendance through the teen years (for seven years or more), attending Hebrew school for seven years or more, and/or attending an overnight camp with Jewish content. The same three factors are highly associated with raising Jewish-by-religion children.

For Orthodox, as for non-Orthodox, families with an intermarrying child, sociologically the most effective Jewish option is to encourage the non-Jewish person to convert into Judaism. Conversionary households function almost identically to in-married households on most Jewish measures. Conversion is usually an ongoing process, a kind of lifelong learning curve. Even if conversion does not take place before marriage, an exclusively Jewish household—regarding religious practice—should be encouraged, because alternative religious narratives in the household can decrease the likelihood of children identifying Jewishly. Moreover, in many families conversions do take place at some point after marriage, and the family becomes much more Jewishly involved.

While the marriage and fertility gaps between Modern Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox Jews have widened, the secular educational gap has virtually disappeared.

Conclusion

Modern Orthodoxy has embraced many aspects of Western culture, while adhering to halakhic guidelines and traditional Judaic values. One central American value deeply cherished by most American Jews—including Orthodox Jews—that is often in tension with historical Jewish culture is the American emphasis on personal freedom. The sociological facts cited in this article indicate that contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews have internalized the American expectation that individuals can shape their own lives in ways that are true to what they perceive as their inner selves.

Examining the potential for halakhic flexibility and responsiveness to new understandings of gender role construction and sexuality is a complex but critical project. This issue of the *JOFA Journal* helps us all to listen to the voices of Modern Orthodox Jews whose lives reflect and are profoundly affected by changing ideas about personal choice. In so doing, this *JOFA Journal* facilitates a critical conversation and process.

Sylvia Barack Fishman is the Joseph and Esther Foster Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University, and co-director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute. She is the author of eight books, including, most recently, Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution.

¹⁵ Steven M. Cohen, Carol Aviv, and Ari Kelman, “Gay, Jewish, or Both? Sexual Orientation and Jewish Engagement,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 84: 154–66.

¹⁶ On December 22, 2009, YU Tolerance Club and Wurzeiler School of Social Work hosted an event titled “Being Gay in the Orthodox World: A Conversation with Members of the YU Community,” moderated by Rabbi Yosef Blau.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews: A Further Analysis of the 2013 Survey of US Jews,” *American Jewish Year Book 2016*, eds. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (Springer International Publishing, 2017), pp. 9–30, 15.

¹⁸ Sylvia Barack Fishman and Steven M. Cohen, *Family, Engagement, and Jewish Continuity among American Jews* (Jerusalem: JPPI Occasional Papers #1, 2017).

¹⁹ Documentation is available from the authors upon request.

A View from the Heights: No Place I'd Rather Be

By Tamar Novick

As I look around at my apartment in Washington Heights, I think about how almost none of the objects in it are ones that I picked out myself. From the couches to the silverware to the bookshelves, most of the items in my apartment were either given to me secondhand or were left by someone who lived here before me. Most of the apartments that belong to other singles are similar. When my friends and I moved here, right after college, our attitude was that we were not planning to stay long, so why bother to invest in nice, new things?

Most of us plan to move out as soon as we find a spouse, to start over when our family and friends will purchase everything for us from our wedding gift registry. In fact, most of my friends who used to live here did move out shortly after they got married. But some of us stay. Life does not always work out the way we plan, and some of us remain single and stay in Washington Heights for longer than we expected. I have been living in “the Heights” for more than seven years now, and as a Modern Orthodox single, there is no place I would rather be.

A Young Adult Community

Washington Heights is known for its young adult community—both singles and young, newlywed couples. A 2016 survey of 504 respondents conducted by the Mount Sinai Jewish Center, a popular synagogue in the area, showed that just over half were single and close to half were married. More than 80 percent said they planned to move out within the next three years. Many board members of the local *shuls* are single, and most are in their twenties and early thirties. In other communities, younger people aren't usually leaders of the Jewish institutions or the ones running activities, but here we have more opportunities to do so. I served on the hospitality committee in my *shul* for three years; helping others find Shabbat meals was particularly meaningful to me because one of the ways I most connect to Judaism in my community is through Shabbat.

No matter how busy a week has been, all of us come together as a community on Shabbat. Much of the social and religious life in the Heights revolves around Shabbat meals—finding them, organizing them, and making sure that everyone has one. For married couples and families who don't have other plans for Shabbat, they will eat with their spouse or family by default, but for singles, our default is eating alone. As a result, in our community those who host meals very often receive requests from the friends they invite to bring other friends along with them to the meal. In other communities it might be considered rude to invite others to someone else's home, but here it is an accepted, even welcome, part of the social scene.

Shabbat meals in the Heights are shared by, on average,

ten to twelve people and are potluck. The host makes only the main dish, and all guests bring one item—wine, challah, side dishes, and dessert. Because friends invite other friends, often there are people who do not know each other. Accordingly, the hallmark of a “Heights meal” is an icebreaker, in which everyone goes around the table and says his or her name and a little bit about themselves, often also answering a question from the host, such as, “What was the highlight of your week?” or “What's the craziest thing that's happened to you in the subway?”

Hosting guests on Shabbat, the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim*, is one I greatly enjoy and that allows me to meet many new people. Over the years I have had the privilege of hosting not only many friends, but also so many people whom I had never met before, who were simply looking for a Shabbat meal on one of the weeks I was hosting. This culture leads to a deep and strong sense of community, because when you are single, your friends are your family. We look out for one another and rely on each other, from helping others move into new apartments, to going on vacations together, to being there for someone if, God forbid, they are sick or in the hospital.

Challenges of Being Single

As with every stage of life, there are, of course, challenges that come along with being single. I have been dating and hoping to find the right person to marry for about nine years now, and it can be difficult and frustrating. It's tough to watch my friends get married and have children while I feel stuck in the same place.

This is not only my personal struggle, but also one that affects many in the broader Modern Orthodox Jewish community. Much has been written about the so-called *shidduch* crisis—how it is more difficult today for singles to find spouses than in the past, and how women are disproportionately affected because there are more available women than men (as is evident at any Shabbat meal in the Heights or at any singles event). The dating system is flawed in that there aren't enough opportunities to meet new people, too much emphasis is placed on superficial qualities like the clothing a person wears, and, overall, the system lacks a certain humanity. For singles navigating the dating scene, we sometimes feel as if we are being reduced to a piece of paper or a list of qualities, instead of a human being.

Many articles have addressed these points in more detail, but what still needs to be addressed is the way the Modern Orthodox Jewish community views and relates to singles. Marital status is sometimes valued even more than age and experience. For example, a 21-year-old who is still in college but is married is viewed as more of an “adult” than a 29-year-old who has a master's degree and is seven years into a career. Additionally, people make many assumptions about singles. When I tell people that I have a sister who is married and has two children, they often assume that she is older than I am. When I tell them that she is younger, actually three and a half years younger, they sometimes get uncomfortable, and start

Single Moms Raising Sons

By Chaye Kohl

You may have met some of us. We are the no-longer-married mothers who are raising sons in the Modern Orthodox community. Not always an easy feat. With no specific statistics to impress you, I will share the considerations, frustrations, and consternations of my personal experience.

When I was married, we rarely had guests at the Shabbat table. My husband was not eager to host. Once I was a divorced head of household, though, I was eager to invite people to my table, share meals and *divrei Torah*, and sing *zemirot*. I told my children who would be

to feel bad for me. I won't pretend that it was always easy, but I am not embarrassed that my younger sister is married, and no one should be embarrassed for me.

'Singles Are Too Picky'—Not

My friends and I are often surprised by how often people make statements that imply that it is our own fault that we are single. We've heard that singles are too picky, we are too comfortable in our environment and do not want to give up our independence, we have "issues," or there is something wrong with us: We need to lose weight, we have not put in enough effort to attend singles events or are not putting ourselves out there enough, or we must, *must* take a professional photo for dating profiles in order for anyone to agree to go on a date with us. Various well-meaning individuals are convinced that they need to push singles to go on a second and a third date with someone they did not like, advising singles to go against their own judgment and not to trust themselves. Although we understand that these people are trying to be helpful, instead of trying to blame us or push us, I would hope that they will learn to listen to us and respect us.

When I first moved to Washington Heights, I thought I would only live here for a year or two, and definitely not seven or eight. But these years have been an unexpected gift. I have learned a lot, grown a lot, and been able to experience Shabbat and be a part of a community in a way that I could not have done in many other places as a single. I have met many wonderful people and been fortunate to have many close friendships that provide support through good and tough times. I still hope to find the right person and move out one of these days, but in the meantime I truly enjoy and take pride in my community, my friends, and my life.

Tamar Novick lives in Washington Heights and is a development associate at a nonprofit organization serving older adults in New York. She has a master's degree in public administration from Baruch College and a bachelor's degree from Yeshiva University/Stern College.

joining us the following Shabbat for lunch. The younger two children—my twins, a boy and a girl—were joyful, but my oldest, the son who had just turned bar mitzvah, quietly turned to me and said, "Why are you inviting people to our house? We don't have a normal Shabbos table—there is no Abba to make Kiddush!" And that is where my struggle to create a "new normal" began.

That Shabbat, one of our guests chanted the Kiddush. Sometimes I would ask my older son to say Kiddush. I wanted to bring new experiences to my home—among them having me, the *Ema*, recite *Hamotzi* over the challah. My sons had never seen this done, were put off, and let me know that in loud voices.

Choosing a Synagogue

The challenges of being newly divorced and trying to figure out finances, hold down a full-time job, drive multiple car pools a week, supervise homework, take children to doctor's appointments, and cheer them on at sports games and dramatic performances all took time and coordination as well as stamina. But one of the most difficult issues to navigate was choosing a synagogue where we could feel comfortable as a family.

One of the most difficult issues to navigate was choosing a synagogue where we could feel comfortable as a family.

I had always been a *shul* goer. My childhood memories include many Shabbat morning treks to a synagogue almost a mile from our apartment. On those long walks, up the hill, holding my father's hand, in all kinds of weather, he was mumbling prayers. It was on those walks that I also learned from him to greet every passerby. I loved going to *shul* and continued to do so into my adulthood.

My uncomfortable experience when I was married had repudiated the old adage (popularized by a Latin American charismatic leader), "The family that prays together stays together." So now it was time to leave the *shtiebel* where I had prayed for most of my married life and find a *shul* and rabbi that served my needs.

We were living in Flatbush; there were myriad options within a one-mile radius in that part of Brooklyn. The search began. I explained to my children that we would be trying out new *shuls*. I would introduce the name of the *shul* option of that week and tell them which of our neighbors/their friends *davened* at that *shul*. The younger two children were eager for the adventure. My oldest went along with it for two *Shabbatot*, and then announced that he would be going back to the *shtiebel* so he could sit next to his friends. I was unsure how to handle that. And then it occurred to me to call the father

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Single Moms, *continued from page 7*

of his best friend; father and son *davened* at the *shtiebel*. I nervously asked him to keep an eye on my son. He, in a very understanding voice, assured me that there was a place on their bench for my son, and that he “would be fine.”

When I chose the *shuls* to try out, I always chose one where I knew someone. I would carefully direct my nine-year-old son to go into the men’s section and sit near the neighbor/friend. My son was not always comfortable. He began to balk at going to *shul*—something that he had never done. After a few weeks of testing the *shul* waters, the twins and I were getting weary.

The Shul That Felt Like Home

Then one weekday evening I went off to Drisha for a lecture. Before attending the class, I struck up a conversation with one of the rabbis who taught a class at Drisha. Rabbi Moshe Sokol had a reputation for scholarship, and I discovered that he was approachable. When I mentioned that I lived in Flatbush, he asked where I *davened*, and I explained my current quest. “Have you ever been to the Yavneh Minyan of Flatbush?” Rabbi Sokol queried. No, I had not, although I had heard good things about it. It was a bit far from my home. “You should try it,” he continued. “You would like it.” “Do you go there?” I asked him. “Sure,” he smiled. “I’m the rabbi!” So the Yavneh Minyan was added to my list.

A few weeks later, when the children were away for Shabbat, I decided to take the walk and pray at the Yavneh Minyan. As a Shabbat-only *shul*, it met in a school building. There was no talking during *tefillah*, a definite plus. There were a few people there whom I knew and felt comfortable with. The *gabbai* recited the prayer for the State of Israel (something that did not happen in many of the other *shuls* I had attended). When Rabbi Sokol spoke, the lacy curtain at the top part of the *mehitzah* was pushed aside, and the rabbi alternated looking from the men to the women as he spoke. At the cookies-and-soda Kiddush, people were friendly. At some point during my first Shabbat visit, Rabbi Sokol approached me and asked if I felt comfortable in the *shul*, and would I consider returning. I explained about my concern for my son. The rabbi assured me that he would do his best to make sure my son was comfortable.

The following week I convinced the twins to join me, and we walked to the Yavneh Minyan. The weather was pleasant, although they did comment on the long walk. We entered the *shul*; *davening* had already begun, and I led them to the bookshelves at the back so that we could get *siddurim* and *humashim*. I was whispering to my son about where I would sit and where he could sit so he could see me. As we were conferring, Rabbi Sokol

spotted us, got up from his chair, and came over to where we were standing. The rabbi shook hands with my son, called him by name, and said, “Please come with me; we have been saving a seat for you.” He quietly guided my son to the front table near the *aron kodesh*, and showed him to a seat situated between his son (close to my son’s age) and his father (a kindly, grandfatherly-looking man). For the next eight years, until he went off to Israel, that was my son’s *shul* seat. My children did not always welcome the long walk to *shul* (especially in inclement weather), but they joined me because the Yavneh Minyan felt like home.

Rabbi Moshe Sokol understood the difficulties of a mother raising sons in the Modern Orthodox community. He always made my family feel welcome. It was he whom I consulted with about making Kiddush and reciting *Havdalah*. When I considered the idea of no longer covering my hair, I called him, learned through the sources he suggested for me, and discussed my options with him.



Chaye Kohl (top row, second from left) and her family.

A Linchpin for our Family

The *shul* was a linchpin for our family. My children made friends there. My daughter gave a *d’var Torah* there when she became a bat mitzvah (unheard of in other *shuls* in our neighborhood). My younger son read his entire bar mitzvah *parasha*, and there were warm handshakes and some hugs from those who had watched him mature on their side of the *mehitzah*. My son became one of the youth leaders there. As a member of the *shul*’s board for nine years, I was able to model communal leadership for my children. Today my three children are still *shul*-goers, raising my Jewish *shul*-going grandchildren.

It was not easy to find the right fit. But, starting with a God-appointed conversation, I found my spiritual home. In the ensuing years, I have moved a number of times for jobs, but I never lost touch with the *minyan*. Each year for Rosh Hashana I return to the Yavneh Minyan. Some of the members who continue to be close friends have made *aliyah* or moved to other places. Some are still *davening* there, and they greet me warmly. The rabbi always inquires after me and my children. There is the same quiet, serious praying, the same heartfelt melodies, and the memories. It is the best way for me to start my year.

An educator for more than forty years, Chaye Kohl has taught both Judaic and general studies classes, in elementary, middle, and high school. She has been a college professor, an education administrator, and a lecturer presenting Torah-themed talks in the various communities where she has lived. She is the proud parent of three children and a devoted savta.

Paying Too High a Price for Being Single

By Zelda R. Stern

My many years of being single and deeply involved in Jewish organizations and institutions showed me the inequities in the dues structure and other monetary policies for singles and marrieds.

In 2001, at the age of 52, I married for the first time; before this, when I was single, I joined a number of *shuls* in Manhattan and in Long Beach, Long Island. I noticed that a few of these *shuls* set annual dues for membership for a single person at a price that was more than half the dues charged to a couple. For example, a couple paid \$1,000 for a yearly membership while a single person paid \$600.

In addition, when I received invitations for charitable fundraising dinners, I noticed that the price of the dinner for singles was usually, once again, more than half the price for a couple. A dinner might cost \$500 for a couple and \$360 for a single person, for instance.

Both the disproportionate *shul* dues structure and the inequitable dinner charges seemed discriminatory, illogical, and, in the end, not helpful to the organization's bottom line: its budget. Some prospective members or attendees, feeling disenfranchised and therefore disinclined to join a *shul* or attend a fundraising event after noticing these disparities, would thus be turned off to participation in Jewish communal life.

Excuses, Excuses

After I joined the *shuls* and realized that their dues structures were disproportionate, I met with various *shul* personnel to discuss the inequities. I suggested that they consider changing the single's dues to equal one-half of the dues of a couple. One *shul* changed its policy; the others did not. When I questioned why these *shuls* wished to maintain their present policies, the responses were: "This is the way we have always done things." "Changing the dues would involve meeting with too many layers of personnel, including the rabbinical and administrative staff, the executive committee and board members." "Singles have more disposable income than marrieds." "Do you want us to raise the cost for a couple?" "We'll meet with any single person who can't afford the dues and try to work things out."

Both the disproportionate *shul* dues structure and the inequitable dinner charges seem discriminatory, illogical, and, in the end, not helpful to the organization's bottom line: its budget.

I did not rejoin the *shuls* that maintained this unequal dues structure. I explained to the senior rabbis and executive directors why I was not rejoining, and told

them that if and when they made their policies more equitable, I would consider rejoining.

When I received invitations to organizational fundraising dinners in which the price for singles totaled more than half the price for a couple, and I wanted to attend the dinner, I sent a check for exactly one-half of a couple's cost. I included a note saying that the disproportionate dues structure discouraged singles from attending the dinner, and I asked that someone contact me to discuss this matter further.

The notion that singles have more disposable income is inaccurate.

No one ever returned the check or told me not to attend the dinner. On the other hand, only one person out of more than a dozen organizations ever called me to have a conversation about my concerns. In this case, after a meaningful discussion, the organization changed its policy to be more equitable toward singles. And even when lay or professional staff did not contact me, I noticed in future invitations that about two-thirds of the organizations had changed their policy, eliminating the inequity in costs.

When I asked development personnel and executive directors why they charged singles more than one-half the cost for a couple, their responses were similar to the ones noted above. Their responses seem illogical and ineffective in raising funds for *shuls*, organizations, institutions, and projects.

Fallacious Thinking

The notion that singles have more disposable income is inaccurate. The single population includes the divorced and the widowed, many of whom are raising children without a partner and who have less money than couples and families with two partners. And a never-married single person does not necessarily have fewer expenses and more expendable income than a couple.

The corollary to this fallacious thinking is the practice, not so many years ago, of an employer telling a single employee that she would be paid a lower salary than a married person because she needed less money. In the same vein, I recently heard of a women's *kollel* in Israel where the stipend for a single student was a great deal less than that for a married student.

The response that the *shul* or organization would "try to work things out" with any single person who could not afford the dues or dinner costs, though sounding charitable in theory, is, in actuality, often humiliating for the would-be attendee, who has to ask for a lower fee and explain why she cannot pay.

Maintaining these policies because this is how it has

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Jewish Women with Unwanted Pregnancies Have a Place to Turn

By Barbara Trainin Blank

A few decades ago, an agency that provided housing and other services to Jewish girls and women expecting babies out of wedlock was closed by the umbrella organization that had sponsored it for decades. The apparent reason was that there were no longer any Jews among the agency's clients. And the apparent reason for this demographic shift was that, in an age of readily available birth control, Jews were using it effectively. In an age of legal abortion, they were taking advantage of the law to end unwanted pregnancies.

Fast-forward several decades, and the pendulum seems to have swung back: An organization that specifically serves Jewish girls and women with unplanned pregnancies not only exists, but has gone national from its local (District of Columbia-area) roots.

In Shifra's Arms (ISA), a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization, was founded by Erica Pelman in 2010 and received its nonprofit status two years later. The name derives from that of one of the two midwives mentioned in the *Tanakh* (in *Shemot/Exodus*) charged by Pharaoh to kill the Israelites' newborn boys—and who were known for their courage in defying his order.

"In Shifra's Arms is the only Jewish unplanned pregnancy organization in the United States," said Ms. Pelman. "It serves and is supported by all segments of the Jewish community, including the Orthodox." As the

organization's website declares, In Shifra's Arms chose the symbol of the midwife because, through the ages, midwives have cared for countless women amid the challenges of pregnancy, birth, and beyond.

The organization's mission is to help struggling pregnant women build a positive future for themselves and their children. It offers both counseling (by phone) and referral to practical resources throughout a woman's pregnancy and for a year after a child's birth. Long-term services are also available, such as assistance to new

mothers in formulating a realistic plan for after the baby is born while meeting their personal and professional goals. Pregnancy care packages, consisting of maternity

clothes, baby clothes, and supplies, are also offered.

The practical resources may relate to health care, housing, and legal, educational, and employment assistance, as well as post-abortion or post-miscarriage therapeutic referrals. For women who are interested in putting a baby up for adoption, Jewish adoption information is available upon request. "ISA does not act as an adoption facilitator," said Ms. Pelman, "but it can educate women about options and connect them with such facilitators."

A major organization that In Shifra's Arms works with in this regard is the Jewish Children's Adoption Network. This fall, the organization is planning to offer an adoption group to provide information about the process. "Some women feel forced into abortion, and many don't want it," Ms. Pelman said.

"Our counseling is client-led rather than formulaic, and is conducted by a counselor with extensive professional training," she added. "We treat all women with the same kindness, compassion, and respect they deserve, regardless of the circumstances or choices they end up making."

Counseling is free. If a woman feels the need for in-person sessions, ISA will refer her to a local agency, as clients come from all over the country.

'A Very Tough Time in My Life'

Lori Prashker-Thomas felt very much alone when she became pregnant in 1995. She was afraid to tell her parents and had no real support—including from the father, as she didn't know who he was. "It was a very tough time in my life," she said.

Within a week after learning of the pregnancy, Ms. Prashker-Thomas had packed her bags and moved to a job more than 1,000 miles away so her parents would not find out about it. Convinced that she would be unable to take care of a baby financially or emotionally, she decided on what seemed to be the only rational course: to give the



In Shifra's Arms

☆jewish support for the pregnant woman☆

Paying Too High a Price, continued from page 9

always been done, or because changing them would involve too much work and time, are weak arguments that result in the disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population and do not serve the *shuls* and organizations well in the end, as they lose potential sources of income.

Maintaining the status quo does a disservice to both institutions and singles. Creating more equitable price-structuring policies will, in all likelihood, prove to be a win-win situation: The singles will be treated more fairly, feel more respected, and thus be more inclined to pay, and the institutions will secure greater funding.

Jewish communal life can surely be strengthened by redressing the present imbalance.

Zelda R. Stern, a donor-activist, is a founding member of the JOFA board, on the JOFA Journal editorial board, and a member of the board of Yeshivat Maharat. She speaks and writes about using philanthropy to effect change and mentors women in Orthodox leadership roles.

baby up for adoption.

Ms. Prashker-Thomas selected an adoption lawyer from the Yellow Pages, asking for both a Jewish adoptive family and an open adoption. She gave birth alone in the hospital, and a few days later, signed away her parental rights.

The attorney had not been honest with her or the adoptive family about her desire for an open adoption, so it never materialized. However, in 2014, Ms. Prashker-Thomas, now happily married, received a note from her daughter saying she'd like to meet, and they eventually reunited.

In an article in *Kveller*, Ms. Prashker-Thomas wrote: "Jewish women deserve to know that they can count on our community during pregnancy and afterwards. They need support whatever choice they make."¹

Ms. Prashker-Thomas is now part of that support system, serving on the board of ISA as vice president. However, she fervently wishes the organization had been in existence when she became pregnant. "I don't know that I would have made a different decision," she said, "but I wouldn't have been alone while I made it. I had nobody."

How In Shifra's Arms Came to Be

Erica Pelman's decision to launch the organization was deeply personal: She had a close friend who was pregnant, with a boyfriend who wasn't "father material," and was planning an abortion.

"It was really upsetting," Ms. Pelman said. "I was pro-choice, but felt, where are the options? I could offer her love and support, but there were no resources in the Jewish community to help her."

At the time, Ms. Pelman herself was at a crossroads about what to do with her life. She had just left her job and was having "conversations with God," asking: What do you want me to do? "There were several issues I could work on, such as clean water, peace in the Middle East, and crisis pregnancies in the Jewish community," she noted.

The choice seemed serendipitous when Ms. Pelman gave birth that same week. Moving into a new community in Washington, D.C. and into an Orthodox *shul*, she found support for her idea—to create a model in the nation's capital that would spread to other communities.

She started seeking clients. Some came due to an article she had written for JOFA² and through other press coverage. She started recruiting volunteer workers, but it soon became clear that ISA needed a professional counselor; it now has two.

Ms. Pelman's vision changed somewhat with the needs that emerged. "I had expected much-younger women, but in the beginning, we were getting women mostly in their 30s," she said.

There was also greater diversity than she had expected. Some of the women were well educated; others were homeless. "There was a wide range, so we had to customize what we do," she said.

An Unexpected Issue: Domestic Abuse

In Shifra's Arms also became involved in an issue it hadn't expected—domestic abuse by men of their pregnant girlfriends and wives. "Some partners may even become abusive upon learning of a pregnancy, due to jealousy or high levels of stress," Ms. Pelman pointed out. "For men who are already abusive, it is very common to see increased frequency and greater severity of abuse during pregnancy."

In fact, unplanned pregnancy sometimes results in part because of abuse, when a partner refuses to use birth control as a form of manipulation or control. Twenty-five percent of ISA's clients are in abusive situations, of which ISA is not always aware.

On the other hand, some relationships are positive but aren't leading to marriage, for whatever reason, even after the baby is born. Melissa (a pseudonym) has a sixteen-month-old son who brings her joy, but when she discovered she was pregnant, her reaction was very different.

"It is very uncommon in Orthodox Judaism to have a baby when you are not married," she said. "Although many Modern Orthodox men and women have sex before marriage, that is not spoken of."

Melissa says she knows of "plenty" of Orthodox women who have had abortions so that "no one would know—though it is against Jewish law."³

She chose a different path—to have her baby. "I decided to consider what my options were, and was not going to let 'How it might look to have a baby when Orthodox and not married' decide it," Melissa said. "I knew what I wanted to do, but also knew how I expected people to look at it."

At first she told no one except the baby's father—not her family or friends—about her pregnancy, until she was sure of her decision. She found In Shifra's Arms by Googling "Jewish, pregnant, and not married." She also came across an article on the web about a woman who had used the organization's services.

In Shifra's Arms supported Melissa in her decision. A counselor called her on a weekly basis, unless she asked for more time, so she could discuss her feelings and the situation. "Once I decided on what option to take, ISA helped me plan how to tell my family," Melissa said. "They sent me books about pregnancy and the first year of a baby's life and sent me maternity wear. They asked if I needed help with other logistics and job planning." She also has the steady support of the baby's father.

Although In Shifra's Arms serves primarily single pregnant girls and women, there's an occasional

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¹ <http://www.kveller.com/i-reunited-with-my-daughter-who-i-gave-for-adoption/>

² <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/the-torch/shifras-calling/>, December 28, 2015.

³ Jewish law concerning abortion is complex, taking into consideration both the mother's life and that of the fetus.

The Second Best Time to Plant a Tree Is Right Now

(or: When Life Doesn't Go According to Plan and the Jewish Community Is Slow to Catch On)

By Anne Gordon

Married people are more religious than unmarried people.

Of course, on the face of it, that's a patently absurd statement. Plenty of married people aren't all that religious; plenty of unmarried people are.

But hear me out.

If you don't compare the masses of couples to the hordes of singles, but consider each person—where he or she would stand as a single person as compared to where he or she would stand if married—the odds are high that the married version of the same person is the more Jewishly involved. (Note: my study is anecdotal.)

I have a cousin who married out (most of us do, I think). I was in favor of the marriage, however, and that was unexpected.

Sarah was beatifically happy. Her joy alone was likely sufficient to convince her intermarriage-averse mother that it was a good match. Me, I was thrilled for her on a personal level, but I'm far too concerned about the future of the Jewish people, and also our present, to approve an intermarriage *gratis*, no matter how great a guy he is (and he is). What did it for me was the conviction that she'd be more "Jewish" (or, if you prefer, Jewishly engaged) married to him than she'd have been on her own. Her previous engagement with Judaism as a single hipster has nothing on managing the practices and messages of a Jewish home. Now, had my cousin been the male of the relationship, my take might have been less positive, what with matrilineal descent and all, but as it is.... These days, the family belongs to a synagogue, celebrates Shabbat, and the kids attend Hebrew school, with their non-Jewish father learning Hebrew alongside.

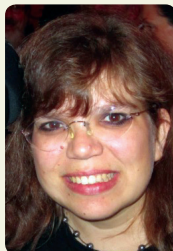
Such is the power of creating a Jewish home.

The enveloping mist of Jewish tradition has fewer places to hover, as it were, in the homes of never-marrieds. Living Jewishly, sure; but no lifecycle events, no transmission of heritage. And then there's the often decreased motivation to keep it all going when you're on your own, where Jewish practices are often tinged with envy, loneliness, and regret for the life not yet lived.

The same is at least as true among the Orthodox community, where toeing the societal norms of marriage and children is a religious imperative, and the encompassing nature of Orthodox practice means that diminished Jewish engagement begins at a more intense place on the spectrum.

The People Who Used to Do More

To be clear: I am not talking about the people who stop



being religiously observant altogether, though for some, the catalyst is undoubtedly the increasingly long years of singledom. One woman I know couldn't bear to be alone for the entirety of the Sabbath day, so the television became her companion. One man found company in his Kindle, and it wasn't a big jump for him to start using electricity regularly.

Rather, what I am talking about is how not getting married makes people stop being as religiously observant as they themselves had been, and presumably expected themselves to continue to be. It's hard to sustain any practice by yourself over the long term. And then there are uniquely "Orthodox single" challenges: many stop keeping the laws of separation between the sexes (*yihud*, *shomer negiah*) in despair of finding the right person, out of curiosity to find out what physical intimacy is all about, because celibacy without end is incredibly challenging, or some combination thereof. Others slack in their *minyan* observance—or avoid regular individual prayer at home. (Certainly some of these same people *daven* in their hearts all the day long, yearning for *basherts*, future families, and release from the limbo imposed by themselves and the Jewish community while they remain "single." But that's not the communal normative expectation of prayer.) Still others relax their standards of *kashrut*: the quick glass of wine with work colleagues, an activity that might once have been horribly taboo, demands "what's the big deal?" for some who spend their days with non-religious Jews and non-Jews, and know them to be quality people.

While those who stop going to *minyan* or lower their standards of *kashrut* or stop holding out for sex (or even stop keeping Shabbat) may have established firm limits for how much observance they'll allow themselves to relinquish, the ground where they once stood has shifted beneath them, though their personal demographic remains the same.

A Dirty Little Secret

The fact is, attrition, if you will, is logical. Like it or not, the social network of the Jewish community revolves around nuclear families. Even recognizing that the Stepford wives stereotype is just that, the community at large approves of those who are able to keep up appearances. Those who don't measure up to the communally accepted model of married parents of X number of children (X can vary by neighborhood) are often shunted aside, usually without intention to harm, but in that simple intuitive sense of like seeking like. And so the default status of long-married couples with no children, single-parent families for whatever reason, divorced men and women, widows and widowers, LGBTQ couples, and all those

Married people are more religious than unmarried people.

never-married folk is external to the Jewish community of which they would otherwise expect to be a part.

The attrition is self-perpetuating, because the less that people participate, the less they participate. When *minyan* attendance is a norm, for example, then skipping *minyan* draws concerned inquiry from the regulars—a communal benefit of being present and accounted for. But if skipping *minyan* is the norm, then the community doesn't miss the truant (so to speak), and has no thought of inducing him (or her) back to *shul*. For single women, who rarely expect to participate in communal Jewish life in a daily way, the sense of exclusion or isolation may be even greater. Without the *minyan* attendance (for most women) that routinizes communal participation, there are few points of connection to the community, few invitations to Shabbat meals, and few natural opportunities to get involved. Single Orthodox Jewish women easily find the question, "Why bother?"

Most importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the attrition is a dirty little secret. Nobody wants to pay attention to the exclusion of Jews from the Jewish community. Indeed, the less attention paid to people slipping away, the less attention need be paid (the foil to less participation yielding still less participation). The "single-never-marrieds" remove themselves from sight, with diminished *minyan* attendance and bare-bones Shabbat observance, slowly exiting the club that doesn't want them as members.

Playing the Blame Game

Ideally, the Jewish community would open its collective arms to welcome those whose family demographics don't fit the stereotypical mold—not with pity (albeit an important spur to kindness, to be sure), but with conscious appreciation that every person is able to contribute to the community at large, regardless of marital status or family size. And ideally, all of those who feel disenfranchised in any way would make a point of joining in—paying synagogue dues (many who are not married don't), showing up to *shul*, signing up for committees, volunteering at the Sisterhood bake sale or the moral equivalent—taking on a contributory role in the community at large.

The ideals are hard to live up to.

Yet it's hard to find a fitting rebuke to communities that, for the most part, are doing what comes naturally. Organizational psychology has a fair bit to say about how to change group behavior, but without a firm structure and a boss (neither rabbi nor *gabbai* nor even synagogue board quite fits the bill), recommendations for change may well fall on decentralized, autonomous deaf ears. And it's hard to suggest that the responsibility here falls altogether on the community, when my anecdotal evidence indicates that relevant individuals are at least complicit.

It's also hard to rebuke those individuals who slide

in their religious observance as a factor of not having found the people with whom they'd ostensibly spend the rest of their lives. Note that when the Torah enjoins the Jewish community to be kind to widows and orphans, it provides no explanation why these parties were left on their own. A question of theodicy, when we get the chance to ask God.

Who Am I to Talk?

At the moment, I am the single mother of a delightful and occasionally cantankerous (as they are) three-year-old boy. And in establishing a Jewish home for more than just myself, I am pushed to refresh the level of observance that I'd begun to take for granted—nay, I am pushed to go that much further. There's that much more at stake.

Having a child doesn't grant quite the standing in the community that "married" does (though I'm sure there are married folks with no kids who have something to say about that). But being a "family" is a different status than "single-never-

married." At the most basic level—I now have company at community events. No, a child doesn't replace a husband in my book either, but the fact remains that I am no longer the solitary person in my own domain. And if the community infantilizes me in my never-married status (and if I still hope for that lifelong partner who may not be in the cards), I have less time to worry about it, while I am busy making the home I didn't have reason or daring to make alone. Not to mention that my attention is directed at protecting the active little guy, soothing his hurts, provoking his giggles, grooming his confidence, and raising him well into goodness, with all that I can muster.

When my boy was about to turn three, he and I had a little chat about how we needed to make sure to go to *shul* every Shabbat once his birthday came. As he grows, that will become even more of an imperative. When we're not in *shul* (which is admittedly still most of my prayer), I feel strongly that he see me *daven*. That he hear me make *brakhot* (he's begun to make his own). That he say *Shema* before he falls asleep. That he don *tzitzit* as soon as he's toilet-trained (and that he learn to say *Asher Yatzar* as part of that process). That his experience of the holidays be rich and religious and anything but perfunctory. He once asked that we learn Torah together soon, a request that is oh so welcome—and beyond daunting.

Especially given the sex-segregation in the Orthodox world, some of the above will surely be challenging, but my point is that in establishing a "Torah-observant home," my own Torah connection inherently and necessarily expands. If I want my boy to grow up with profound Torah convictions, then I can't slack off in the Judaism department. And then I myself am elevated from where I had stood on my own, as I work to bring Torah

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In establishing a Jewish home for more than just myself, I am pushed to refresh the level of observance that I'd begun to take for granted.

JOFA and Yeshivat Maharat: The Summer Tour

This summer, JOFA and Yeshivat Maharat combined forces to bring women scholars to communities throughout the United States, Canada, and South America. The Summer Tour stopped in thirteen communities during July and August (see map) and featured speaking engagements by seven students and graduates of Yeshivat Maharat. The purpose of the Summer Tour was largely to continue exposing communities to models of female scholarship and leadership and to the missions of JOFA and Yeshivat Maharat.

Beyond simply engaging individual communities with these scholars, this project created a powerful sense of connectedness between geographically, socially, and religiously diverse communities. Participants focused not on what makes their communities different—their geographical location, the height of their *mehitzot*, or their stance on partnership *minyanim*—but, rather, on their shared support for women leaders and scholars in the Orthodox community.



Singles Salon Series

Dating, marriage, and non-traditional family structures have been a major programmatic focus for JOFA over the past year, as reflected in the current issue of the *JOFA Journal*. One of our primary initiatives has been to craft a salon series to initiate grassroots conversations about how to foster healthier communal attitudes toward dating, marriage, and singlehood. The series, which is ongoing, consists of salon conversations for three different demographic groups:

- Young people in their twenties who experience excessive social and familial pressure to be dating
- Single adults in their thirties and forties who experience exclusion and discrimination as a result of their marital status
- Parents who play a critical role in setting expectations and shaping communal attitudes

The salons have provided participants with a safe space to share their painful stories. These conversations have given rise to many productive ideas about what can be done to create positive changes in our community (see “Best Practices,” page 17).

Website

Tens of thousands regularly visit our website for the resources that JOFA has created and curated. This summer, we’ve been hard at work to improve our website to make our resources more easily accessible to those who can benefit from them. Stay tuned for the launch of our new and improved website this fall!



Reproductive Health

As reproductive health is a perennial item in the news, Jewish women have turned to JOFA for resources on contraception, abortion, infertility, and other issues related to women’s health. JOFA is uniquely positioned to share halakhic and medical considerations through our social media, blog, and webinar platforms.

JOFA has published blog posts on reproductive health, including Dr. Sharon Weiss-Greenberg’s piece, “As an Orthodox Rabbi’s Wife, I Was Grateful for Planned Parenthood” and Shira Lankin Sheps’s “Struggling with Infertility.” We hosted a webinar series to demystify the halakhic and medical parameters about autonomy in family planning and the various forms of contraception. In May, JOFA co-hosted a panel discussion with National Council of Jewish Women New York on “Reproductive Justice.” All of these resources are available on the JOFA website.

In the coming months, JOFA will continue to work on reproductive health, specifically addressing the issues of fertility, infertility, and postpartum depression.

Emoji Campaign: Show Your Face



When Adina Miles, a social media activist, was asked by the *Flatbush Jewish Journal* to blur her face out of an ad she was running in the weekly paper, she responded by covering her face with an emoji. Ms. Miles's bold move sparked a viral social media campaign, dubbed #frumwomenhavefaces, to bring attention to the ultra-Orthodox community's attempt to erase women's faces from print and electronic media.

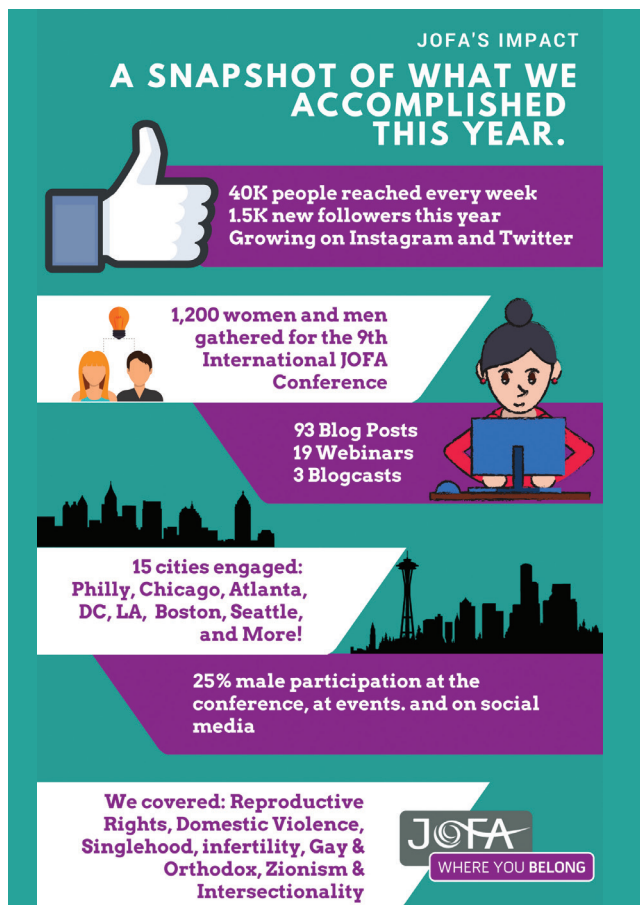
JOFA played a key role in disseminating this social media campaign, using our strong Facebook presence to share images that satirically placed emojis over the faces of prominent women. The campaign was so successful that actress Mayim Bialik re-shared one of JOFA's images, of which she was the subject, garnering further support for the cause.

New! JOFA Book Clubs: Kindling Conversations in Communities, One Living Room at a Time

Are you interested in discussing the articles in this issue—and future issues—of the *JOFA Journal* with people in your own community? Partner with JOFA to host a reading group (think: book club) in your home! We'll provide discussion guides to get the conversation going, tips for facilitating groups, and a sample e-vite. Questions are very open-ended, and you can choose which you want to discuss. You will decide which issues resonate most strongly for your group.

In addition to inviting your own friends, fellow *shul* members, and neighbors, you can ask JOFA to help you advertise and identify people who might be interested in joining your group. For more information about this new initiative or to volunteer your home, please contact JOFA Program Manager Rivka Cohen at rivka@jofa.org.





Unwanted Pregnancies, *continued from page 11*

exception. Although she is married, Risa (a pseudonym) had a “crisis pregnancy” because she had “just gotten into a rhythm at work” and was managing the couple’s two other children. “Even though every bill was paid each month, we had no money left for savings or anything else,” she said. “I could not imagine how we’d pay for necessary baby items, daycare, and so on. I also never imagined my life with three kids, and wanted nothing to do with a larger family. The financial piece was really the most stressful, though.”

The pregnancy wreaked havoc on Risa’s body, and she entered a severe depression, stressing her husband as well.

After finding In Shifra’s Arms on Facebook, Risa had a phone meeting with a counselor approximately once a week. “This helped keep me on track and to realize that I’m not alone, and there was someone to listen. They also sent me gift cards to get some nice-looking maternity work clothes. I’m so glad I found this organization.”

That’s a sentiment shared by those who have benefited from the services of In Shifra’s Arms. Patterns of behavior change, and it is clear that today, Jewish women, including Orthodox women, sometimes find themselves pregnant unintentionally. Having support and guidance as they make difficult choices is a blessing.

ISA can be reached by phone at 866-360-5872 and by text at 202-573-7611.

Barbara Trainin Blank is a freelance writer based in suburban Washington, DC.

Plant a Tree, *continued from page 13*

into my family, and we as a family (eventually) pay it forward to the community.

It’s still not enough.

The disenfranchisement element remains. There are those who respond to my Shabbat invitations with, “Oh, you don’t need to go to all that trouble.” They mean well. But I’m sensitive to a (perhaps fictitious) undertone of “you’re not actually fit to host,” since I wouldn’t have extended an invitation if I hadn’t specifically and intentionally wanted “all that trouble.”

Moreover, if my satisfaction with my role in life has expanded exponentially since the arrival of my son, it should nonetheless go without saying that the recommended antidote to the attrition factor I’ve described is not, and cannot be, having children on one’s own. It’s not for everyone—not the least because reproductive technology doesn’t always work. Outside of Israel, it can be prohibitively expensive. Not everyone feels equipped to mother on her own. And let’s not forget that a good number of singles who feel shunted aside are men, who encounter obstacle after obstacle when they seek means of parenting on their own.

The stereotype of the nuclear family has apparently always been stronger than its expression.

No, the community at large must do better.

Rebecca Traistman’s penetrating work, *All the Single Ladies*, suggests that it might not be as hard to accomplish as we all think. She investigated how the modern Western world shifted, such that far fewer women were marrying than ever before ... and discovered that there was no real shift. The stereotype of the nuclear family has apparently always been stronger than its expression.

That’s the case in the religious Jewish world as well, and it’s exactly the point. There have always been those who broke the stereotyped mold. The matriarchs were barren. The patriarchs—some of them—married “late.” The family dysfunction is quite literally the stuff of legends. With these origins of the Jewish people, it should be easy enough to integrate the complexities of people’s lives that are already present in the congregation at large into the communal narrative—one that we all create together.

Anne Gordon is the deputy editor of Ops & Blogs at The Times of Israel. A native of Boston, she holds a B.A. in History and Philosophy and an M.A. in Judaic Studies from Harvard University, and hopes to complete her doctorate in girls’ Talmud education. She is an alumna of the Drisha Scholars Circle, and learned at length in women’s batei midrash in Jerusalem. She has taught widely, including at Matan, Midreshet HaRova, Yeshivah of Flatbush High School, Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Central), Kohelet, Maimonides, and Drisha Institute. She is a founding member of Chochmat Nashim.

Two Dirty Words—*Shidduch* Crisis—And How to Fix Them

By Sharon Weiss-Greenberg

One year ago, I was asked to speak on a panel at a Union for Traditional Judaism conference on the “*shidduch* crisis.” I agreed because I felt I had what to share on the topic. I had personal experience of the pressures, judgments, and negativity that surrounded my dating journeys. I have very close friends who are single. I have always thought of myself as someone sensitive to the needs and wants of those who remain single. I felt that this was an opportunity to speak up and express my distaste for the language of the “*shidduch* crisis” and for the unhealthy reality and expectations that the community at large has placed on those who are not married.

After agreeing to speak, I was asked for the title of my speech a few weeks before the conference. There must have been a miscommunication, for a few weeks out I discovered that I was being asked not to participate in

a panel, but to present for 45 minutes on the “*shidduch* crisis.” Ever the professional, I shared my title, “How to Lose a Single in Two Words: *Shidduch* Crisis.” I figured that to ensure that I had enough content to fill a 45-minute time slot, I would need to do my homework. To gather more information, I posted on my Facebook page: “Crowdsourcing: When you hear the language ‘*Shidduch* Crisis,’ what comes to mind? Please share the good, the bad, and the ugly.” As the personal accounts came pouring in, over more than half a year, I realized how ugly the situation had become. I was overwhelmed by the hundreds of personal stories shared on my wall, in my e-mail inbox, and in a Google form I had set up to handle the incredible number of stories that were heading my way.

People shared hope, pain, frustration, comfort,
continued on page 18

BEST PRACTICES For Inclusion of Singles in Our Communities

1. Never ask someone who is single why he or she is single.
2. People who are single want to have conversations about a variety of topics beyond dating or singlehood.
3. Do not assume that all singles want to be set up. Ask people who are single if they would like to be set up. If they respond affirmatively, ask them what they are looking for in a partner.
4. Membership dues or the cost for attending programming for a single person should not be more than half of a couple's cost. Higher costs would constitute a singles tax.
5. Include unmarried constituents on committees and boards to ensure that diverse needs are being met.
6. Singles should pay membership dues to institutions they participate in. Singles should be proactive in their involvement in the community by joining committees, attending communal events, and participating in Jewish communal life.
7. Be thoughtful in your choice of language. If targeting a specific audience, market to the community at large, even if adults only, children only, or intergenerational groups are the intended participants. (Aunt Susie, for example, may know that her niece would love to join this activity.)
8. Events targeting singles shouldn't be earmarked solely for people who are not married. Instead, open up some programs for adults only, regardless of marital or dating status.
9. Singles should be active in planning events for the community. Everyone's voice matters, so let's hear them. Encourage friends to participate in community events and programs to ensure a representation from the singles community. Thus, program planners will know to be inclusive of this demographic group in future planning initiatives.
10. At weddings, dinners, and other functions, adults should be seated with adults, no matter what their marital status is.
11. People who regularly host for Shabbat and holiday meals should extend invitations to singles. Hosts should make an honest effort to do so in advance and make their guests feel truly welcome. Be cognizant in Shabbat table conversations that talk is not primarily directed toward the experiences of those who are married. (e.g., how they met, weddings, strollers, diapers, and the like).
12. Singles should invite all community members—single, married, married with children, empty nesters—for Shabbat meals to be inclusive of the broader community. Guests should warmly accept invitations from hosting community members no matter their marital or family status.
13. If housing someone who is single for Shabbat, provide the person with the same accommodations that you would for a married guest.
14. All these best practices apply to all single members of the community, no matter their age or marital status.

Shidduch Crisis, continued from page 17

desperation, and so much more. They shared of themselves in a deeply personal matter, for which I was so grateful. Themes emerged from their stories—themes of sexism, ageism, body shaming, ethnocentrism, racism, and many other forms of discrimination. What I came to learn and understand was that any “ism” in our community is grossly exacerbated and worsened in the singles community. Some respondents shared proactive ideas, such as Melanie Notkin’s Savvy Auntie approach, which advocates celebrating being an aunt (or an adoptive aunt) and identifying ways for aunts to celebrate in rites of passage.

As executive director of JOFA, I knew that JOFA is well situated to learn more, listen more, so that we can do more and do better. That is what we have attempted to do this past year, as reflected in the “Singles Salon Series,” described on page 14 in this journal. The feedback we received about how singles are treated needed to be further explored, named, and called out. This journal explores many facets of this issue, including personal narratives and organizational responses.

With the guidance of some who were open to sharing the challenges of being an Orthodox single Jew, we penned a list of suggested best practices for synagogues, institutions, and homes (see sidebar on previous page). Some may appear to be so obvious as to be ridiculous; others may be ideas you had not considered. Every single suggestion came from multiple people who were subjected to experiences in which they were treated as less than full-fledged members of a group. We are asking community members to treat all people as people. We are asking everyone to recognize that we should not have a class system based on marital status.

The theme of this issue of the *JOFA Journal* holds a deep place in my heart because people in our community are being “othered” for no reason. I cannot count how many times this past year I was told by singles that they simply wanted to be treated like persons—that they did not want to feel invisible, that they just wanted to matter.

For lasting change to take hold, we all need to work together. It is time to fix this long-overdue attitude problem and become a truly inclusive community.

Sharon Weiss-Greenberg is the executive director of JOFA.

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Our Gift to Our Community: Our Amazing Children, Some of Whom Are LGBT

By Sandra Sterling Epstein

We are always taught the value of passing on our traditions, teaching and Jewish practices to our children, even in the daily words of our *Shema, veshinantam levanekha*. I know that my husband and I take great pride in our four children, who are involved and engaged in the Jewish community in so many different ways. One daughter is a lawyer; she, my son-in-law, and their four daughters live in a wonderful community and I enjoy that awe that comes with seeing their family repeat the holidays and observances, community involvement, commitment and the *shomer mitzvot* way of life we instilled in our children. Another daughter is a successful professional as well, having completed medical school and a residency in family medicine and beginning a fellowship in palliative care, looking to practice medicine for underserved people and to educate their minds and inspire their souls as well as heal their bodies. Her twin sister and her spouse live in the same community she does outside Boston; she is the senior synagogue organizer for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, getting Jewish communities to care about issues that confront us as Jews and Americans of all ages and nationalities and situations in life. Our youngest is our son, a college student attending Northern Arizona University, pursuing his dream of becoming a professional photographer. All of them are engaged in Jewish life and community, committed to making our world a better place, and caring about the social justice causes that are connected to the foundational Jewish values we all hold dear. Oh, I almost forgot—the doctor and Jewish community professional are lesbians, and the second spouse is my lovely daughter-in-law.

So, you ask, how can this be? How can an Orthodox or halakhically observant person even engage in or begin such a conversation? This is what I believe to be true through observation of individuals, research I have done, study of Jewish texts, and consulting various medical resources that are critically important to consider. We are all born with our own points of identity in terms of sexuality and gender. In fact, the Talmud lists seven (or eight, depending on how you prefer to count) different gender identities, and engages in discussions from time to time of how we include all in our communities and should facilitate the process by which we all do as many *mitzvot* as possible. There are, to be sure, limits on many of us in various aspects of life—including those who are left-handed, women, those with hearing or sight impairments, those missing limbs, children, those with limited understanding, those who suffer from various challenges, those not having reached full physical maturity regardless of age, and so on. That being said, these discussions are NOT about exclusion, nor are they about defaming any group;

rather, these discussions attempt to address the breath and breadth of Torah and *halakhah* in terms of how we go about our lives given our various circumstances. The case could and must strongly be made that this is just as true regarding those in our community who are LGBT and not on the binary scale for sexuality or gender.

To that end, enter Eshel, the Orthodox LGBT inclusion and advocacy organization. Its mission statement indicates that “Eshel’s mission is to create community and acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews and their families in Orthodox communities. ... Eshel creates bridges into Orthodox communities to foster understanding and support.” As part of its work, it has been my honor to direct its Welcoming Shuls Project (WSP), in which we connect with rabbis and communities that we can recommend to Orthodox LGBT Jews, as well as their families. We are all too aware of the suicide rate and other particular dangers in the LGBT community. When we have members of **our** families who are both LGBT and want to stay in the observant Jewish community, it is our particular obligation to practice the mitzvah of *pikuah nefesh*, saving lives and not endangering those who are our parents, siblings, children, loved ones, and friends. We teach “*Al tifrosh min ha-tzibbur*”—do not separate yourself from the community; but how can we teach this if we do not ensure that we have places in our larger Orthodox Jewish community for our LGBT members to feel welcomed, accepted, and valued for the important human beings they are? One of the main challenges for Orthodox families, to whom this need for inclusion extends, has been articulated by many as follows: “When the LGBT member of our family comes out of the closet, the rest of the family goes into the closet.” How sad this is; do we really want to lose entire families and generations of potentially important and involved members of our community?

We acknowledge that there are halakhic challenges, though **not** the obvious one that people point to necessarily, as this story is so much more involved and multifaceted, having little if anything to do with those verses in *Vayikra*. The real challenges are: How do we engage our LGBT community members with respect and honesty? How do we all show that respect for each other, with all sides having realistic expectations? This is part of what we have been trying to assess in the Welcoming Shuls Project. To date, more than seventy Orthodox rabbis have agreed to be interviewed; the summary findings of this project can be found on the Eshel website. These *shuls* and communities are located in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC in the United

States, and Ontario, Alberta, and Quebec in Canada, as well as in Jerusalem.

Generally, these and many other rabbis indicate that they are aware that there are LGBT Jews in their community. Further, there is a shared feeling that all Jews should feel welcome and validated. The main challenges at present generally involve families of same-sex couples and some issues around transgender persons. That being said, so much progress has been made in the past few years; even the difference in conversations we are having since we began WSP twenty months ago is palpable. When I speak with these rabbis, I begin by introducing myself and the work of Eshel; I then engage them in a conversation about our children and share the accomplishments of my own, if we know each other on any level (which often happens in our small Jewish world with its few degrees of separation). It is then that I share the fact that two of my children are lesbians and ask if they could come and feel welcome in their *shuls*. Through this personal interaction, I have established a safe place for them to say yes, and they do just that. With respect for each other and reasonable expectations on all sides, this is workable and can even have wonderfully positive ramifications for our communities.

As one rabbi said to me when I asked him if I could recommend his community to parents of LGBT children and the LGBT persons themselves, he replied (knowing one of our children), “If they

are half as committed and knowledgeable as your child, please send me all of them!” That is what we want to be able to offer our LGBT loved and cherished ones, and it is happening. There is no question that this is a process, but we are making significant inroads. The goal is for the entire community to gain from the collective benefits that we all receive from the WSP program members. May we continue to go from strength to strength in ensuring a future of observant Jewish lives and community inclusion for all our members.

If you know of a rabbi with whom we should be communicating, please contact us. For more information about Eshel and the Welcoming Shuls Project, visit <http://www.esheonline.org/>. And please feel free to contact this author at shulisrose@aol.com.



Eshel's Welcoming Shuls Project lists synagogues that welcome LGBT congregants.

Dr. Saundra Sterling Epstein directs Beyachad, a program that brings best educational practices to Jewish education. She also currently serves as educational consultant to Eshel, the National LGBT Inclusion Consortium for the Orthodox Community. Dr. Epstein received her B.A., M.S., and Ed.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, and has published widely on women of faith, LGBTQ inclusion, environmental sustainability, prayer, and the importance of interfaith and intrafaith dialogue.

Finding a Place for My Family under the Umbrella of Ahavat Yisrael

An Interview with Shlomit Metz-Poolat by Miryam Kabakov

Miryam Kabakov: Tell us about your family—how it began, and what it looks like now.

Shlomit Metz-Poolat: Like many other Modern Orthodox Jews, I married at a young age. I met my [now] ex-husband through friends at college. We were married for twelve years and had one daughter, J., who is now sixteen. During my marriage I began to realize that I was gay, and eventually, after coming out to myself, I came out to my ex-husband, my family, and friends. Not only were my friends understanding and supportive, but my ex-husband and some family members were as well. Everyone in our circle realized that our daughter came first and did not deserve to be harmed in any way by our divorce. It was an uncontested divorce that culminated in the maintaining of a friendship for more than twenty-five years, remarriage for us both, and one well-adjusted and very much-loved teenager.

In 2005, more than a year after my ex-husband and I separated, and I had received my *get*, I met my life partner, and we eventually bought a home together, settled in the same community I had lived in with my ex, and began raising J. in a blended family. My ex eventually remarried as well, also stayed in the same community, and J. realized that life for her included “three moms and one dad,” as she put it. She very quickly realized that it was not such a bad thing after all, since she simply had more parents who loved her than the average kid did!

Recently, my family grew even larger as my partner and I took in two children, M. and E., whose mom is a dear friend who is terminally ill with breast cancer. Our families blended together easily, and the kids moved in before leaving for summer camp. We are looking forward to their joining us full-time when they return, as are our *hevra* in town, who have embraced them. They will both be attending a Jewish day school near our home, which we required of both of them, despite their lack of observance over the past several years. They, too, are willing to blend into our family and live in an observant home, respecting our practices, and being loved and cared for in return. That is our new and larger family as it exists today.

MK: Have you had an easy time becoming part of the Orthodox community where you live?

SMP: I was always part of my community because I arrived in it as a straight, married, and observant woman. When that changed—the straight, heterosexual married part only—I found it relatively easy to divorce, come out, and date again, since I have been blessed with some amazing friends. Finding my life’s partner was truly Hashem’s gift

to me, as she too made raising J. her priority. My *hevra* grew to love my quiet soul of a partner and embraced her as well. Everyone could see that she was so good for both J. and me. That being said, when we married and I hyphenated my name for legal purposes, before DOMA [the Defense of Marriage Act] was overturned, the rabbinic leadership in my community took offense at that. My *shul* of nineteen years removed me from its membership because of this. Apparently, hyphenation became against *halakhah*!

Despite the homophobia and discrimination, we decided to stay because we realized that the people in our community are kinder and greater than their leaders. We have built a life for ourselves, a home that is a drop-in center every Shabbos, that welcomes everyone, that houses a Modern Orthodox *minyan* every Friday night, and is a place that we love to call home. I think our community is what we and our friends have made of it.

MK: How does the Orthodox community that you are part of accept and include your family (or not)?

SMP: The rabbinic leadership, plain and simple, not at all—except for a kind and charming Chabad rabbi who has welcomed us into his *shul*. Unfortunately, it is too far for us to get to regularly on Shabbat, but we are

there on Purim and for *Eicha*, as well as for some events here and there. The community itself, for the most part, has embraced us. Of course, there are those few who are filled with

I have faith that my fear of not finding such places for children of LGBTQ Jews is rapidly becoming a thing of the past within the Modern Orthodox world.

hatred for Jews who are different from themselves, but truth be told, those people are irrelevant in our lives. And as much as they drive the hatred and homophobia we have experienced at the hands of the rabbinic leadership, we are inspired by those who rise above it, and by the very fact that there are more who support us, express that support, and build a community with us, than there are those who wish to drive us away. I have always been a glass-is-half-full person, and that is the driving force behind our making the best out of a tough situation.

The *yamim tovim* are also made easier for us simply because there is a *shul* around the corner from us where we have friends and find a place to *daven* for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is part of the largest *shul* in our town, whose rabbis also will not grant us membership (because they feel they must abide by the errant rabbinic ruling of the *shul* that removed me), but we feel that we must have a place to stand before God during the *yamim noraim*, to hear the *shofar*, and to fast with our community. A family attending that *shul* buys us tickets as part of their family, and we become honorary family

members for those days, simply because the community members are more understanding of *ahavat Yisrael* than are their leaders.

MK: *Have you ever been excluded from religious ritual moments in your shul?*

SMP: As Modern Orthodox women, we are not really missing out on ritual inclusion, such as for *minyan* or *leyning*, but not granting us membership—even each one of us as a single person—makes us feel unwelcome in certain *shuls*. Thus, we do miss out on community events and inclusion during the *davening*, where we could otherwise be witness to the rituals of the Jewish people on any given Shabbos or *hag*.

MK: *Are your s'mahot [happy occasions], life passages, milestones, yahrzeits, etc. announced in shul like everyone else's?*

SMP: An unequivocal no. For example, just trying to figure out how to wish a *mazal tov* to our daughter on the occasion of her bat mitzvah became a question of who could be named in the *shul* announcement. Sadly, they (the same rabbis who would later take my membership away) would not allow my partner to be named, despite the fact that my partner had raised J. since she was four years old. So we simply wrote it as “*Mazal tov* to the family of J.” We just rolled with the punches and when I gave my speech, with those very rabbis present in the room, I said a very loud and public *mazal tov* to all the relevant parties and featured my partner in some funny stories about raising our daughter. I really am not one to take things lying down!

MK: *Where do you feel more at home—in a welcoming Orthodox shul or in an LGBT Jewish group or synagogue like Beit Simchat Torah in New York?*

SMP: I feel most at home in a welcoming Modern Orthodox *shul*. I love the Modern Orthodox *tziyoni* world; it is where I was raised, and it is really the only Judaism I know and feel comfortable building my family life within. That being said, I know there are welcoming Modern Orthodox *shuls* out there; sadly, my town does not have one of them. But I, my family, and some of my dear friends intend to change that. We hope slowly to bring together enough allies and LGBTQ Jews to form a Modern Orthodox *shul* within my community—one that truly practices, embraces, and radiates *ahavat Yisrael*!

MK: *Have you been able to enroll your children (child) in day schools and camps easily?*

SMP: I am thankful to Hashem that J. graduated from a Modern Orthodox elementary school, was accepted into a wonderful yeshiva high school, and has shined because

there are rabbis and educators who cared more about the education of an observant Jewish child than about whom her mother loves. She also attended an amazing B'nei Akiva sleepaway camp and had two wonderful summers there. She currently works in a Modern Orthodox day camp and has become quite the mature and responsible young woman, along the way. I am finding that these schools and camps have slowly found a place for children of LGBTQ Jews because they recognize that *ahavat Yisrael* must prevail. I have faith that my fear of not finding such places for children of LGBTQ Jews is rapidly becoming a thing of the past within the Modern Orthodox world, as I witness these places embrace and accept these children.

MK: *Describe the upcoming changes your family is about to have and how the community has responded.*

SMP: Becoming moms to two more teenagers, fourteen and fifteen years old, is an absolutely overwhelming feeling. But we rise to the occasion because of the support we find around us. Their mom and I met eight or nine years ago when we spoke on a panel at the LGBT Center in NYC, about being gay and finding a place within religion for us. Luckily, we kept in contact. Along the way we would touch base or meet up, and she supported me through my own battle with breast cancer, with her knowledge about the disease and what I could expect. I now recognize that we met for a greater reason, and her children are that reason. Our friends see that too.

I think that the community, in recognizing what we are taking on, wants to be part of this special moment and mitzvah too. Every one of our *hevra* is finding a way to help, to be there for us, to invite them, to include them, and to make them feel cherished and loved. Our friends also make us feel like we are all in this together and that we are truly not alone, despite rabbinic attempts to exclude us. To see people run to do *mitzvot* for us and for them is truly witnessing Hashem's creations at their very best. Being part of that has been an almost unbelievable, moving, and great emotional experience.

I think what I am most happy about it is that we, as LGBTQ Jews who have had to care for each other and have had to form our own safe places and welcoming communities like Eshel and JQY [Jewish Queer Youth], are lucky enough to witness change occurring within the larger Jewish community. Our generation and the next are finding ways to include us in communal life. All over the world, rabbinic leaders are finding ways as well, and I am looking forward to what the future holds—a future in which community members and their leaders are on the same page in finding a place for us all under the umbrella of *ahavat Yisrael*. And to those who do not, I am certain that they will simply be left behind.

continued on page 27

I am looking forward to what the future holds—a future in which community members and their leaders are on the same page in finding a place for us all under the umbrella of *ahavat Yisrael*.

Six Things I Wish I Said Sooner

By Rachel Waldman

For the past ten years I felt that I was an outsider in my own community. I was a single, someone who, in their eyes, was neither here nor there, didn't belong. When *The Layers Project*, a photojournalism and interview-based blog about the lives of Jewish women, started profiling people who were single, friends asked me to share my thoughts. Some of these friends were afraid to share their own thoughts because they did not want to be labeled "bitter singles." I, newly married, had the benefit of avoiding that label. I decided to focus on small, yet meaningful, changes our community can make.

Please understand this: I am not "bitter," and I never was. I don't hold any grudges. I loved my single years—they were a time of tremendous growth for me. I had time for myself—for traveling, growing, and forming incredible friendships. I was vice president of a *shul* at age 27. I created programs and initiatives that were important to me. I was able to spend my time productively, expose myself to different types of people and new experiences, and spend much time thinking about the kind of mark I want to leave on this world. But it was still hard.

Remember to celebrate everyone in your community, including those who are not married. When a community does not know how to make space for single adults, it's the community that misses out.

Although there are no quick fixes, here are some suggestions for changes our community can make to help those who are not married feel less like outsiders.

1. Let's start thinking about the words we use. For some reason, you can be a "single girl" at the age of 40 and a "married woman" at 21. Our language around this issue needs to change. I am not a "single" and I am not a "*shidduch* crisis"; I am a person.

2. Let's stop telling people what's wrong with them and what they need to fix. In a community where so many already feel judged, why make people feel even worse about themselves? Finding your life partner does not make you a dating and marriage expert. I would never dream of commenting on my friends' marriages, sex life, or infertility struggles, but random people often make comments and suggestions to people who are single. All of this advice makes you feel like there is something wrong with you (which maybe there is, but that's for a therapist to help you with). People already feel vulnerable and isolated; let's help them feel loved and appreciated.

3. Realize that everyone has different experiences. Some people are single because they want to be, others

are single because they don't feel ready or are figuring themselves out, and others are desperate to get married but it's not happening for them. Some might be figuring out their sexuality. Don't make assumptions as to why people are single or how they feel about it.

If we genuinely care about people who are single in our communities, it's time we start thinking about our words, actions, and attitudes, and treat single people like people.

4. "Single" does not mean younger, less able, or less mature. Being single doesn't mean I don't have life experience. It seems like getting an Mrs. is more valuable than one's experiences in life. You need to be "mature and married" to be a matchmaker on a very popular dating site. Why? I have made three matches, but can't be a matchmaker because I'm single? People tend to look at you as a "single," as if you are *nebuch* or less of a person, and you start to think of yourself that way.

5. Just because I'm single doesn't mean I'm not thinking about my future. I made a separate life plan in case I didn't get married: Where could I live as a single parent? At what age would I freeze my eggs? You realize that your life will be different than the one you imagined, and different than how most of your friends are living. It could still be amazing and meaningful, but the Orthodox community has yet to create a space for it. It's time for the Orthodox community to support families who don't fit the mold.

6. Remember to celebrate everyone in your community, including those who are not married. When a community does not know how to make space for single adults, it's the community that misses out. So many of my close friends who are not married are generous, thoughtful, insightful, and innovative, and could add so much to different communities. But why would they want to be a part of a community that pities them?

I believe that everyone in our community is coming from a place of love and a sincere desire to help. But if we genuinely care about people who are single in our communities, it's time we start thinking about our words, actions, and attitudes, and treat single people like people.

Rachel Waldman is a speech-language pathologist and M.S.W. candidate who has served in lay leadership and community organizing roles in her local Washington Heights Jewish community, as well as in the broader community. An earlier version of this article appeared in The Layers Project and is reprinted with permission.

Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law

By Ethan Tucker and Micha'el Rosenberg
K'tav/Mechon Hadar, 2017, \$24.95

By Aryeh Klapper

In *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law*, Rabbis Ethan Tucker and Micha'el Rosenberg have produced a book that is noteworthy for its integrity, accuracy, and clarity. The authors worked for many years to refine the book's content and responded to critiques with thanks and openness to revising their arguments, if not their conclusions. (Full disclosure: I am thanked for my "sharp and serious critiques and criticisms" [p. 9], ongoing from when I was a stripling Orthodox rabbinic adviser at Harvard Hillel while they were undergraduates.) The formal elements of their arguments are consciously crafted to fall within traditional and contemporary Orthodox halakhic parameters. The quality and humility of their work can serve as a model for private and public halakhic conversations about such issues.

This hard-earned and well-deserved praise does not mean that the book ought to succeed in directly affecting the *davening* practices of halakhic communities, nor that it successfully justifies the gender-identical practices of current prayer communities that otherwise follow the *halakhot* of prayer. It is vital to understand why, even if the explanation is lengthy.

In Talmud *Sanhedrin* 17a, Rav Yehudah, citing Rav, states that only scholars who know how "to declare the *sheretz* pure from the Torah" may be seated on the Sanhedrin. In other words, membership on the High Court was limited to those who were able to construct intellectually plausible halakhic arguments with results that contradicted explicit Torah verses. This does *not* mean that such scholars were entitled to walk into the Temple with a dead *sheretz* in hand. On the contrary: It means that intellectual plausibility cannot be a sufficient basis for halakhic action, because intellectually plausible halakhic arguments are available to justify any action. Supple and open minds are necessary for *halakhah* to respond effectively to reality; authority is necessary for *halakhah* to mean anything at all.

Put differently, where there is inadequate halakhistic will, there is no halakhic way. This is true whether or not one believes that there ought to be such will and way. The key questions are what constitutes adequate halakhistic will, and what—beyond intellectual plausibility—is necessary for an argument to gain authority.

Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg perform a valuable public service by clearing away the claim that halakhic change to the intersection of gender and prayer is theoretically impossible. (Claims of theoretical halakhic impossibility

almost always reflect the intellectual horizons of the claimant rather than those of Torah.) They also make a *prima facie* case that no one has successfully articulated a convincing modern rationale for Orthodoxy's gender-differentiated practice.

This leaves them in the following position: They acknowledge that past *halakhah* has always had—and required—gender-differentiated prayer roles. (Here they implicitly exclude American Conservative Judaism from the live halakhic tradition.) However, they find continuing that differentiation to be a morally intolerable signal that women are not full citizens of the Jewish polity.

To resolve this tension, they propose that communities endorse one of two halakhic moves:

1. Asserting that the rationales offered in the past for gender-differentiation would yield different or even opposite results today. Excluding women used to be a way of maximizing the honor of God or the community in a prayer context; today it diminishes honor.

2. Asserting that biological women living in progressive contemporary societies do not fall under the category of "*nashim*" found in past halakhic texts. (This would likely entail saying

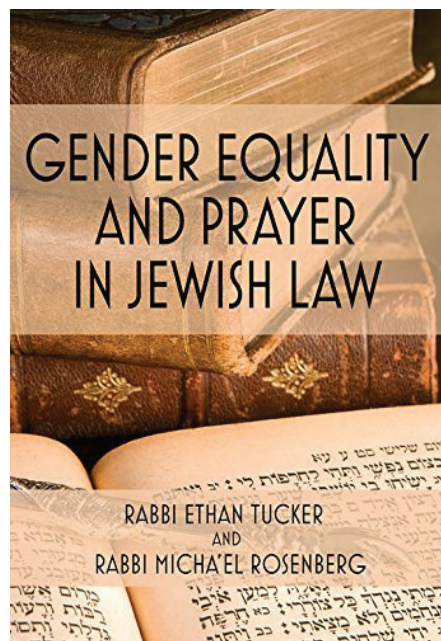
that such biological women are bound by *mitzvot aseh she-hazman gramam*.)

Each of these moves is halakhically conceivable, but neither of them is halakhically compelling in and of itself. The real issue is whether these proposals have enough authority to legitimate action on the part of those who buy into the underlying analysis. (The book's claims about citizenship, honor, and womanhood require separate treatment; here I am addressing those who are unalterably convinced of these claims.)

Arguments about authority tend to be inherently arrogant, circular, and off-putting. Asserting the need for great scholarship, for example, implies that the level of one's own scholarship is sufficient to judge that of others. Claiming that community X isn't *frum* enough to self-legitimate its idiosyncratic practices invites a recitation of one's own community's all-too-evident flaws. I have little expectation from the attempt, and yet I cannot simply concede the field.

Halakhic legitimacy for a given position, as I understand it, requires that it be supported by scholars with some degree of some or all of communal recognition, personal character, personal scholarship, relevant experience, sociological responsibility, intellectual persuasiveness, moral persuasiveness, and spiritual persuasiveness. (This list may not be exhaustive.) All these are evaluated within the boundaries of those who accept the authority of current *halakhah* as binding Divine Law.

This seems intuitive to me, but I recognize that my



intuition is not universally shared. So here is a preliminary and inadequate effort at explication.

A fundamental assumption at the heart of Torah is that the Jewish people constitute a political community bound by religious law. Like any constitutional republic, *halakhah* limits formal political influence to those who accept the authority of the constitution and its authorized interpreters.

Those interpreters may well get it wrong; the existence of the sacrifice brought when the Sanhedrin errs demonstrates that the Torah assumes the fallibility of its authorized interpreters, and that the Law has meaning independent of their interpretations.

As an analogy: I believe that the Supreme Court has often gotten the U.S. Constitution wrong. But I accept that its interpretations are binding law until I succeed in getting the Supreme Court to rule differently.

Of course, *halakhah* has no Sanhedrin nowadays. No one should consider granting the *Rabbanut*, the Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah, the Rabbinical Council of America, the International Rabbinic Fellowship, Beit Hillel, Tzohar, or any other existing body anything resembling that sort of authority. These groups are not representative of the halakhic citizenry as a whole, and often they are not accountable to anyone but themselves.

But we can and must maintain a middle ground between oligarchy and anarchy, or between the ideology of *da'as Torah* and the belief that everyone can decide the legal meaning of the Tradition entirely and unaccountably for himself or herself.

I acknowledge with shame that the battle, as it stands, is largely lost. The halakhic citizenry is a small percentage of the Jewish people. The overwhelming majority of Jews do not see themselves as bound by Jewish law (except perhaps, to some extent, on some issues of personal status, where the secessionists are correspondingly more impassioned). Most halakhists make their decisions in total disregard of the interests and values of the Jews who reject their own authority, let alone of those who reject the authority of *halakhah* entirely; this generates a vicious cycle of alienation. Despair would not be unreasonable, and allies are desperately needed.

There is no question that Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg are such allies. Their book is genuinely intended to fortify *halakhah*, and to show those whose commitments on issues of gender are a priori that there is space for them within *halakhah*. In this I wish them all success.

However, I believe that the currently appropriate space is that of loyal opposition. The loyal opposition is entitled to keep agitating for change, but must recognize the authority of the legal status quo. But for the role to be meaningful, and therefore psychologically tolerable, it is vital that those who support the status quo genuinely listen to those who seek change, acknowledge that

change is not inconceivable, and indicate that they would themselves become a loyal opposition should change happen legitimately. Failure to do these things breeds cynicism, and then disengagement and/or rebellion.

Furthermore, if it were likely that eliminating gender distinctions in prayer would engender a mass return to general halakhic loyalty, or prevent a mass exodus, I think a way would be found. For exactly such purposes, the category *hora'at sha'ah* (emergency decree) was instituted, even if all other halakhic mechanisms were found too implausible.

But I see no evidence that existing gender-identical services attract large numbers of Jews to recognize the authority of the rest of *halakhah*, although Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg strongly encourage and very much wish this. We are fooling ourselves if we believe that prayer issues are all that keep large segments of American Jewry from embracing *kashrut*, *tabarat hamishpahah*, endogamy, and the biblical prohibition against certain male homosexual acts as binding Divine law, to list just a few issues.

We are equally fooling ourselves if we expect that creating gender-identical prayer services in response to sociologically based critiques will bring peace to those who already love and practice *halakhah* but have moral difficulties with its positions on gender, for whom prayer is often a secondary issue. More often, by making it evident that *halakhah* cannot stand against the moral pressure of the times, we will undermine a fundamental

basis of their observance and commitment.

Here it is relevant that Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg themselves advocate for change without accepting the legal status quo as binding. Their book evangelizes for practices that they have long since adopted themselves and implemented in communities they lead. No halakhic arguments could persuade them to do otherwise.

Why does this matter? The halakhic system sets up different standards for evaluating halakhic arguments, depending on their relationship to existing practice. Arguments that support an idiosyncratic practice of a community that generally accepts conventional halakhic authority may need only meet the standard of *limmud zekbut*, which can hover around bare plausibility. Arguments that seek to legitimate the practice of a community that rejects conventional halakhic authority, or halakhic authority altogether, may need to be utterly compelling to overcome concerns such as “strengthening the hands of sinners.” It matters a great deal whether gender-identical prayer practices are evaluated under one rubric or the other.

It therefore also matters a great deal that Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg implemented their practices *before* developing the specific arguments in their book, and that they will continue to follow those practices *regardless* of

The book is genuinely intended to fortify *halakhah*, and to show those whose commitments on issues of gender are a priori that there is space for them within *halakhah*.

the acceptance or rejection of those arguments by other halakhists. It seems reasonable to say that those who are not open to halakhic persuasion cannot lend personal authority to their halakhic arguments; rather, they cannot be given personal halakhic authority, at least with regard to those specific issues, until after their arguments are accepted.

**The gates of halakhic debate
close rarely, if ever—
and, ideally, never.**

I recognize that this argument can be reversed. Halakhists who require gender-differentiation, it will be argued, are as impervious to argumentation on their side as Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg are on theirs. Perhaps no one can be granted authority on the issue outside their ideologically kindred community, and the ordinary processes of *halakhah* are helpless. This is how we get sectarianism, or “the Torah becoming two Torahs.”

Rabbis Tucker and Rosenberg deserve great credit for seeking to prevent or overcome sectarianism by making their argument on common halakhic ground. But this by itself cannot be a sufficient basis for success. Halakhic argumentation matters because some arguments fail.

Moreover,

1. arguments for radical sociological change must meet a higher standard than arguments for minor sociological change, and

2. arguments for assimilating the practices or values of a nonhalakhic or failed halakhic community must meet a higher standard than arguments for the legitimacy of practices indigenous to a halakhically observant community.

In light of all the above, my best judgment is that, despite my deep personal appreciation of its authors, this book does not succeed in gaining practical halakhic legitimacy for gender-identical, or “identitarian,” prayer services.

This does not mean that such legitimacy is eternally precluded. Practical *halakhah* is responsive to both social change and intellectual creativity, and in general it is unwise to make absolute predictions about its course. There is no question that many men and women who are absolutely faithful to *halakhah* as-it-is would prefer that it be different. The most anyone can properly say is that he or she cannot imagine circumstances in which this or that practice would become halakhically legitimate, and that, as he or she now understands the issue, any community adopting such a practice now or in the future would be in violation of *halakhah*.

But neither God nor Torah is bound by our present imaginations, let alone by the imaginations of specific

scholars. The gates of halakhic debate close rarely, if ever—and, ideally, never.

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper is the dean of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership and rosh beit midrash of its Summer Beit Midrash program. More of his Torah and information about the center can be found at www.torahleadership.org.

Beautiful Days, Holy Days

Avraham Peretz Friedman

Compass Books, 2015, \$24.95

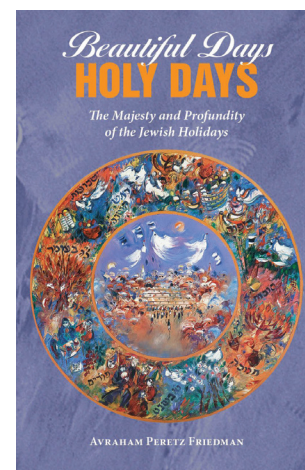
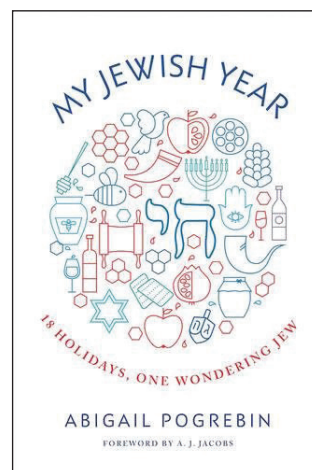
My Jewish Year

Abigail Pogrebin

Fig Tree Books, 2017, \$22.95

By Roselyn Bell

These two books explore ostensibly the same subject matter—the holiday and fast day cycle of the Jewish year—but could not differ more in tone, sensibility, intended audience, and purpose. *Beautiful Days, Holy Days* is a collection of *divrei Torah* (words of Torah) appealing to a *frum* audience—that is, believing and mitzvah-observant Jews who “walk the walk and talk the talk” of the yeshiva world. Pogrebin’s *My Jewish Year* is the story of a liberal Jew’s immersion in the Jewish holidays, examining them from many historical and denominational angles, as a way to “fill in the gaps” of her own Jewish knowledge and strengthen her Jewish identity.



Beautiful Days assumes an audience that already knows what the Jewish holidays are about and is seeking new insights into their associated texts. It is an anthology of Torah-based thoughts rather than one continuous work, and the essays vary greatly in length, in tone (from homiletic to polemical), and in their relevance to the holidays.

The sensibility is unmistakably *yeshivish*, as evidenced by the frequent use of Hebrew terminology without full translation. A piece under Rosh Hashanah on “The Progression of *Malchuyot*, *Zichronot*, *Shofrot*,” for

example, translates *malchuyot*, but not the next two words, assuming that the reader is familiar with the three sections of the Rosh Hashanah *mussaf* service.

A chapter titled “*Mitzvot ah’saih she’ha’z’man g’raman*” lays down the categories of time-bound positive commandments from which women are exempt as immutable rules, but fails to see the “gray areas.” Hearing the shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah is certainly a positive time-bound mitzvah, but in many communities women have become accustomed to coming to *shul* for shofar blowing. In such communities, a shofar may be brought to a woman’s home if she cannot go out.

In contrast, Abigail Pogrebin’s book is an ongoing quest, a search for meaning, and she invites other seekers of all stripes to come along. She is “attuned in ... [her] current expedition, to the Opted-In vs. the Opted-Out Jew,” and writes for both, occasionally telling the well-informed that they can skip the next few paragraphs.

Pogrebin has done her homework; read a lot of books; interviewed leading modern Jewish thinkers, from Blu and Yitz Greenberg to Adin Steinsaltz to David Ellenson to Judith Hauptman to Sara Hurwitz; and ordered a lot of “stuff,” including a shofar from Amazon (who knew Amazon carried them?). She worked on improving her Hebrew with less than full success. But she asks the right questions (which she learned from Rabbi Irwin Kula): “What do we hire a holiday to do for us? What is the yearning to which the holiday is a response?”

Pogrebin is determined to cover the full spectrum of the Jewish calendar, from prep time in Elul, to the six fast days (which she complains about), to the newly minted spring memorial holidays of Yom HaShoah, Yom Hazikaron, and Yom Ha’atzmaut (which do not appear in Friedman’s book). She sometimes explores multiple interpretations of a single holiday, such as seeing Hanukkah as a tirade against assimilation or as internecine warfare or as a late rabbinic invention of the cruse-of-oil story seven centuries after the Maccabees.

She seeks out new iterations of traditional rituals, such as the JCC of Manhattan’s all-night Shavuot smorgasbord of learning, with everything from stress management to Israeli folk dancing. She attends *the Feminist Seder*, a ritual begun in 1976 by Esther Broner and, among others, Abigail’s mother, Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Abigail fondly remembers attending as a privileged “Seder Daughter,” and she now aspires to pass on this tradition to the next generation of Pogrebin daughters.

At times in this book I acknowledged the wisdom of the rabbinic adage, “*Tafasta meruba lo tafasta*” (“If you seized a lot, you didn’t seize”). When the author rushes from one synagogue service to another (I think four in all) on Yom Kippur, I felt she must have lost something in the shuffle. On Hanukkah, she arranges home-based evenings of menorah-lighting and gift-giving and receiving, orchestrates a panel at the Jewish Theological Seminary, rushes to her father-in-law’s hospital bedside in Chicago, and ends up at the White House Hanukkah party. I felt exhausted just reading about it.

She devotes several chapters to different experiences

of Shabbat, but understandably prefers Friday night services in her home Reform synagogue (of which she becomes president during the year), which always begin promptly at 6 p.m. and end at 7:15. I felt she missed out on one aspect of the rhythm of the Jewish year in not experiencing the flow from “early” to “late” Shabbatot.

Ultimately, Pogrebin learned a lot and felt a wide range of emotions from her year, and out of her subjective experience emerges a snapshot of how Jewish life in all its variety is celebrated in twenty-first-century America. Hers is a journey that Jews of many persuasions can identify with and come along on.

If All the Seas Were Ink

Ilana Kurshan

St. Martin’s Press, 2017, \$26.99

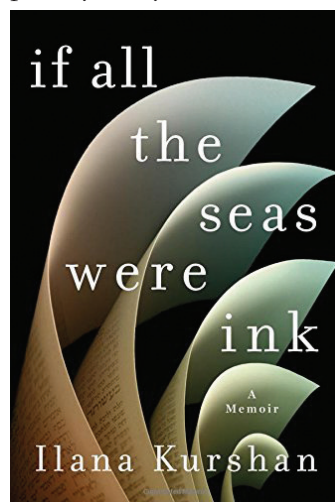
By Roselyn Bell

If All the Seas Were Ink is a marvelous weave of personal memoir, study of Talmudic texts, and evocation of the classics of English and world literature. If you are a fan of all these genres, as am I, you are in for an irresistible read.

The book is structured around the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud as read in *daf yomi* (the one-page-per-day study of the Talmud in sync with study groups

around the world), but Kurshan’s lively narrative voice provides the energy that carries the reader along. In every book of the Talmud, even the abstruse ones such as *Zevachim* or *Middot*, she finds a link to some aspect of her life and interprets the ancient text through her personal insights from life and her reading of world literature.

How did a translator, literary agent, and graduate student of literature come to do *daf yomi*? Kurshan was at a low point in her life, alone in Jerusalem after a painful divorce following a brief marriage, when her jogging partner mentioned that she was learning a page of Talmud a day. Kurshan took up the idea, both as a way to provide herself a reason to get up in the morning and as an extension of her lifelong love of text study. Having been raised in a Hebrew-speaking American Jewish home, she was able to study the text in the Steinsaltz Hebrew translation and commentary edition. As a student of literature, she could appreciate (rather than be frustrated by) the way the rabbis transition from one topic to another. Seeing her commitment to *daf yomi* as a sort of *neder* (vow), she found a way to keep up with its relentless pace as her life moved from singlehood to marriage to becoming the mother of three small children.



Thus, employing her impressive intellect, she overcame many of the challenges to learning *daf yomi* that have defeated others.

Kurshan brings a strong feminist sensibility to her reading of Talmud, aware that “for fifteen hundred years [this text] has been regarded primarily as the province of only the male half of the population.” She questions, for example, the rabbinic dictum of *tav l’maitav tan du m’l’maitav armelu* (a woman would prefer to be married [to any sort of man] than to be alone). She wonders whether that principle is applicable in an age when a woman can own property, support herself, and even have a child on her own. Tongue in cheek, she concludes, “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.”

Rather than getting angry or offended by the Talmud’s historically conditioned stereotypes of women, she digs into the text as “fertile ground for gleaning new insights and fresh perspectives.” She brings to tractate *Ketubot*, with its discussion of how much various brides are worth, Virginia Woolf’s observation that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” When Kurshan arranges her bookcase, she puts her volume of *Ketubot* next to *A Room of One’s Own*, and Yevamot goes next to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

This arrangement of her library is but one of many laugh-out-loud passages in the book. She names the two pieces of salmon she is cooking Rav and Shmuel to represent the sages’ conflicting views of the meaning of the verse “We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for free,” (Numbers 11:5), and the conclusion in *Yoma* that “*Ha v’ha havay*”—both are right. She calls the dish prepared for a pot-luck Shabbat lunch Reish LaQuiche after the Talmudic scholar Reish Lakish. And a young man who sees her studying her *daf* on the plane to Israel asks, in a memorable pick-up line, “Brovender’s or Drisha?”

The book is subtitled *A Memoir*, and Kurshan is open and honest about her life, loves, and struggles. Her story is told not as a straightforward chronological narrative, but as a weaving back and forth from the Talmud text, revealing herself in layers. She can be wonderfully descriptive of her everyday life—shopping for vegetables in the *shuk*, jogging the hills of Jerusalem, nursing a baby with one hand holding the Talmud and the other cradling the infant.

On the other hand, Talmud study provides her with a structure for examining the meta-questions, ancient and contemporary, personal and societal. For instance, she compares the problems of life in the diaspora, dwelling among non-Jews, as described in tractate *Avodah Zarah*, to the difficulties in *Horayot*, when Jews had sovereignty—and how those pros and cons play out today. In *Erkhein*, a distinction made between Levites who were gatekeepers (*m’shoarim*) and those who were poets (*m’shorerin*) sparks in her a bit of a midlife crisis—as she

questions her career as a literary agent (thus a gatekeeper) and considers devoting more time to the creative work of translating (like a poet). This volume could be the product of that desire to be creative and at the same time “to enable the words of Torah to reach a wider audience.”

This engrossing book could be seen as the first woman’s commentary on the Talmud. It employs “women’s way of knowing”—seeking the personal significance of a text rather than a timeless rule or principle. Kurshan is not Rashi, explaining, hair-splitting, and resolving ambiguities. Rather she is a seeker of a broader truth, a weaver of insights gleaned from literature and life, and a poet. “Go and learn.”

Umbrella, continued from page 21

MK: Regarding your desire for community, what do you most wish you had that you don’t have right now?

SMP: To feel an equal member of a community synagogue, with all the bells and whistles that come with membership, in a *shul* that practices love for one’s fellow Jews, even for one who is different. I have always said that it is easy to practice *ahavat Yisrael* for a Jew who is just like you, but the real challenge is doing so for the one who is not. I pray for that day to come, for it cannot come soon enough!

Shlomit Metz-Poolat is a career prosecutor. She is a graduate of Yeshiva University High School for Girls. She writes for The Blogs: Times of Israel about being an observant gay Jew. She and her partner of twelve years are raising three children and live in New York.

Miryam Kabakov is the executive director of Eshel and the editor of Keep Your Wives Away From Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires (North Atlantic Books, 2010), a collection of writings about the challenges and joys of LGBT Orthodox Jews. Previously, she was New York program director and national program director of AVODAH: the Jewish Service Corps, coordinator of LGBT programming at the JCC Manhattan, and the first staff member of Footsteps.

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