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# Gender Differences in the Construction of Spirituality, Work, Learning, and Community by Baalei Teshuvah

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the question, "How do Jewish men and women who have become Orthodox (*baalei teshuvah*) compare in their constructions of spirituality, work, learning, religious practices, and community?" It is based on a qualitative research study that included interviews with 48 *baalei teshuvah* (24 men, 24 women), two focus groups, and ten key informant interviews. Participants were from the East Coast of the USA. We found the women more affirmative about their spirituality and feelings about community; men identified with these experiences but not the terminology. The men gave more attention to work and to their struggles integrating work and religion. The women expressed excitement about learning whereas the men conveyed self-consciousness over their language and learning deficiencies.

## **Comments**

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3 ORIGINAL ARTICLE

4 **Gender Differences in the Construction of Spirituality, Work,**  
 5 **Learning, and Community by *Baalei Teshuvah***

6 **Roberta G. Sands · Robyn Rapoport Spero ·**  
 7 **Rivka Ausubel Danzig**

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 22 experiences but not the terminology. The men gave more  
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 25 learning whereas the men conveyed self-consciousness  
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**Keywords** Gender · Orthodox Judaism · *Baalei teshuvah* · Spirituality 27  
 28

**Introduction** 29

Religious intensification within the Abrahamic religions is 30  
 a notable contemporary development (Antoun and Hegland 31  
 1987; Zeidan 2003). This paper is concerned with this 32  
 phenomenon in Judaism and its gender consequences. It 33  
 examines the perceptions of *baalei* (m., pl.) and *baalot* 34  
 (f., pl.) *teshuvah*, Jewish adults who were raised secular or 35  
 within more liberal Jewish religious movements and later 36  
 committed themselves to strict religious observance and 37  
 became Orthodox. These *baalei teshuvah* have moved 38  
 away from the egalitarian-minded culture of their upbringing 39  
 to a religious culture that separates the genders in 40  
 synagogue and community life and valorizes women as 41  
 wives and mothers (Kaufman 1991). This paper examines 42  
 and compares the ways in which *baalei* and *baalot* 43  
*teshuvah* describe spirituality and interpret their gender 44  
 roles in the context of their everyday lives as Orthodox 45  
 Jews. Based on a qualitative study of men and women who 46  
 described their spiritual–religious transformation over time, 47  
 it uses data from individual interviews, focus groups, and 48  
 key informant interviews. The research inquires about how 49  
 men and women who have become Orthodox compare in 50  
 their constructions of spirituality, work, learning, religious 51  
 practices, and community. 52

Since the women’s movement of the last thirty years of 53  
 the twentieth century, gender differences within Judaism 54  
 have been the subject of much discussion. Although writers 55  
 such as Berman (1973) and Biale (1984) have attempted to 56  
 clarify the basis for discrete gender roles in Jewish law, 57  
 feminist Jewish scholars view such distinctions as inequi- 58

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59 table (Heschel 1995; Plaskow 1990). A couple of social  
 60 scientists who have researched *baalot teshuvah* have tried  
 61 to understand women’s choosing a way of life that appears  
 62 to run counter to feminist sensibilities (e.g., Davidman  
 63 1991; Kaufman 1991). Yet little research on *baalei*  
 64 *teshuvah* has compared the perspectives of men and women  
 65 on specific dimensions of their religious change.

66 Baalei Teshuvah

67 During the 1960s and 1970s, significant numbers of Jewish  
 68 youth who were influenced by the counter-cultural move-  
 69 ment of the time became spiritual seekers (Danzger 1989).  
 70 In the course of their quests, they explored a variety of  
 71 religions and forms of spirituality, with some discovering  
 72 Orthodox Judaism. Recognizing this return to traditional  
 73 Judaism as a new phenomenon, a few social scientists  
 74 examined the initial processes of becoming observant  
 75 (Aviad 1983; Danzger 1989; Davidman and Greil 1994;  
 76 Glanz and Harrison 1978). Early research also described the  
 77 educational institutions and programs that were developed  
 78 for this population (Aviad; Danzger) and methods of  
 79 recruitment to such institutions (Shaffir 1983). As Danzger  
 80 explained, men’s and women’s educational programs were,  
 81 for the most part, in separate settings, with the men’s  
 82 institutions putting a great deal of emphasis on learning  
 83 Talmud (a compendium of law and discussions about laws).

84 Other social science research has focused on women  
 85 who have become observant. Davidman (1991) conducted a  
 86 qualitative study of women who participated in a beginners’  
 87 prayer group at a modern Orthodox synagogue and women  
 88 who attended a Chasidic seminary (Chasidism is an  
 89 Orthodox religious movement that arose in Europe in the  
 90 18th century. It is characterized by mysticism, charismatic  
 91 leadership, and religious fervor [Jacobs 2003]). Like other  
 92 authors (Aviad 1983; Danzger 1989), Davidman focused on  
 93 those who were in their early stages of exploring and  
 94 embracing Judaism. Another researcher, Kaufman (1991),  
 95 included women who were living more settled lives.  
 96 Davidman and Kaufman conducted their interviews in the  
 97 1980s. Women who participated in both authors’ studies  
 98 were attracted to Orthodox Judaism because of its emphasis  
 99 on family and respect for women as mothers and did not  
 100 find gender roles in Orthodoxy limiting. While rejecting  
 101 feminism, the women celebrated womanhood with respect  
 102 to traditional family roles in the context of the Orthodox  
 103 community (Davidman; Kaufman 1991). Kaufman de-  
 104 scribed these women as accommodating to patriarchy by  
 105 ignoring that which maintains male dominance and resist-  
 106 ing patriarchy by creating their own women’s community.

107 More recently, Topel (2002) studied Brazilian *baalot*  
 108 *teshuvah*. She found that the women were accepting of the  
 109 practices related to family purity but resistant to covering

their heads. Roer-Strier and Sands (2001, 2004; Sands and  
 Roer-Strier 2004) studied women from a family perspec-  
 tive. Their research examined the impact of a daughter’s  
 becoming Orthodox on relationships with the family of  
 origin, especially the mother-daughter relationship. This  
 research, which was undertaken in the USA, Israel, and  
 South Africa, found a cultural gap between the mothers and  
 daughters with the mothers more identified with feminist  
 ideology than the daughters.

This paper expands upon and updates previous research  
 on *baalei* and *baalot teshuvah* by including men as well as  
 women in an analysis of gender and by addressing contexts  
 relevant to living out one’s commitment as an Orthodox  
 Jew in the early years of the twenty-first century. It explores  
 work, learning, and community, everyday sites in which  
 men and women participate, and specific religious prac-  
 tices. Furthermore, the paper examines the spirituality of  
*baalei teshuvah*, which was acknowledged (e.g., Kaufman  
 1991) but was not the specific focus of previous research.

Spirituality

*Baalei teshuvah* have grown up in a culture that has diverse  
 understandings of spirituality. In the past, religion and  
 spirituality were seen as part and parcel of the same  
 phenomenon (Hill et al. 2000). A contemporary trend has  
 been to separate the two concepts with spirituality describ-  
 ing “the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the  
 thoughtful” and religion referring to “the organizational, the  
 ritual, and the ideological” (Pargament 1999, p. 6). This  
 conceptual bifurcation was influenced in part by the baby  
 boom generation of last past century whose spiritual  
 searching was not necessarily tied to organized religion  
 (Roof 1993). This resulted in a “New Age” type of  
 spirituality that has diffused to the wider society.

In recent years social scientists have given increased  
 attention to spirituality. Some have attempted to “unfuzzy”  
 this “fuzzy” term (Zinnbauer et al. 1997) and to specify and  
 empirically assess the link between spirituality and religion  
 (Hill et al. 2000; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Pargament  
 1999). Hill et al. concluded that a “sense of the sacred” is  
 central to both concepts, but religion also includes a search  
 for non-sacred goals (e.g., social belonging, meaning) and  
 means and methods (e.g., prescribed behaviors or rituals)  
 that are validated by an identifiable group.

In his introduction to the first of a two-volume collection  
 on Jewish spirituality, Green (1986) defines Jewish spiritu-  
 ality as “Life in the presence of God” (p. xv). As he  
 explains, “the cultivation of a life in the ordinary world  
 bearing the holiness once associated with sacred space and  
 time... is perhaps as close as one can come to a definition of  
 ‘spirituality’ that is native to the Jewish tradition and indeed  
 faithful to its Semitic roots” (p. xiii). Berman (2002)

161 suggests that the Biblical concept of *qedushah*, holiness, is  
 162 similar to the Biblical and Rabbinic understanding of  
 163 spirituality and that this is “about the process of bringing  
 164 God’s values into the world” (p. 4). These values, based on  
 165 God’s attributes, include productivity, interdependence,  
 166 love, responsibility, mercy, truthfulness, and gratitude  
 167 (Berman). *Qedushah* is realized through conscious, atten-  
 168 tive performance of the *mitzvot* (commandments) and by  
 169 engagement in the material world, the locus of meaning  
 170 (Berman). Other Jewish perspectives on spirituality are  
 171 those of the philosopher, Martin Buber, who viewed  
 172 spirituality in terms of sanctified relationships; and the  
 173 philosopher-theologian, Abraham Heschel, who connected  
 174 spirituality with the observance of *mitzvot* (Silberstein  
 175 1987). These writings lead us to envision Jewish spirituality  
 176 as relational (through a relationship with God or interper-  
 177 sonal relationships) and value-oriented (by imbuing every-  
 178 day life activities with Jewish values), and that spirituality  
 179 can be realized through performing *mitzvot*.

180 Jewish Feminist Perspectives

181 Jewish feminism in the US arose in the context of  
 182 American feminism (Cohen 2005). Accordingly, American  
 183 Jewish feminism has assimilated feminist values and  
 184 considered how they apply to Jewish women’s participation  
 185 in religious, educational, and organizational life and to their  
 186 own spiritual development (Heschel 1995; Plaskow 1990).  
 187 All the major Jewish religious movements—Reform,  
 188 Conservative, and Orthodox—have been affected by  
 189 American feminism in some ways (Dashefsky et al. 2003;  
 190 Diner 2006).

191 Since the latter quarter of the twentieth century, the  
 192 Reform and Conservative movements have accommodated  
 193 to egalitarian feminist values by counting women in the  
 194 *minyan* (the quorum of ten that is required for a prayer  
 195 group), allowing women to receive honors at and read from  
 196 the Torah, and ordaining women as rabbis (Cohen 2005;  
 197 Dashefsky et al. 2003; Diner 2006). Because separation  
 198 between men and women is integral to traditional Jewish  
 199 life (Dashefsky et al. 2003) and is constituted in Jewish law,  
 200 Orthodox Judaism has been more constrained than the other  
 201 movements. Orthodox women pray in a separate section of  
 202 the synagogue behind a partition (*mechitza*) and are not  
 203 permitted to take on leadership roles in the religious  
 204 service. Nevertheless, some Orthodox women have formed  
 205 women’s prayer groups or have developed other ways to  
 206 express their identities as Orthodox women (Dashefsky et  
 207 al. 2003). This includes the learning of sacred texts and  
 208 engaging in learning as adults, which Orthodox women  
 209 have taken on “with great thirst and exhilaration” (Greenberg  
 210 2000, p. 13). The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance  
 211 (JOFA 2006) has the mission of expanding “the spiritual,

212 ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for women  
 213 within the framework of *halakha*” (Jewish law) ([http://](http://www.jofa.org/about.php/who/mission)  
 214 [www.jofa.org/about.php/who/mission](http://www.jofa.org/about.php/who/mission)).

215 One of the challenges embedded in Jewish law is the  
 216 exemption of women from positive time-bound *mitzvot*,  
 217 such as putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries) in the morning  
 218 (Berman 1973). With respect to Torah study, opinions about  
 219 women’s obligations and lack of obligation have varied  
 220 over time (Berman 1973). As a result of women’s  
 221 exemptions and ambiguity about their obligations, expecta-  
 222 tions of Orthodox women appear to be discretionary  
 223 whereas the religious obligations of men are more explicit.  
 224 This, in turn, may affect the ways in which women engage  
 225 in their spiritual-religious life.

226 The literature that has been reviewed indicates that  
 227 differences in gender roles are built into the religious  
 228 system. Past research on women who have become  
 229 Orthodox has found that rather than viewing these differ-  
 230 ences as problematic, *baalot teshuvah* celebrate women’s  
 231 family role (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991). Because  
 232 previous research concentrated primarily on the newly  
 233 Orthodox who were influenced by the counter-culture  
 234 movement, it is not clear how men and women who are  
 235 living as religious Jews today perceive themselves in  
 236 various spheres of their lives. Accordingly, this study  
 237 explores the question, “How do men and women who have  
 238 become Orthodox compare in their constructions of spiritual-  
 239 ity, work, learning, religious practices, and community?”

240 Relevant Concepts

241 In the course of examining the data produced by this study,  
 242 we identified several concepts that helped us understand the  
 243 situation of *baalei teshuvah*. For one, we noticed that  
 244 changing from non-Orthodox and relatively secular to  
 245 Orthodox involved a *status transition*. Initially *baalei*  
 246 *teshuvah* were novices to a religious movement that  
 247 requires substantial knowledge of Hebrew and sacred texts,  
 248 adherence to numerous religious laws, and an intricate set  
 249 of social practices. In order to move from novice to full  
 250 membership, they needed to attain mastery of the norms of  
 251 the religious community and demonstrate their proficiency  
 252 and commitment. Some of the religious requirements can  
 253 be learned through formal study. Others are observed or  
 254 learned informally from others. Informal learning occurs  
 255 through *socialization*, a social process in which novices  
 256 acquire knowledge by interacting with members of long  
 257 duration over shared activities (Long and Hadden 1983).  
 258 Finally, we view *gender roles* as expected behaviors  
 259 associated with one’s being a man or woman, and *role*  
 260 *conflict* as stress related to different expectations for  
 261 behavior associated with a status held by oneself or others  
 262 (Biddle 1986).

263 **Method**

264 This was a qualitative research study that used a construc- 312  
 265 tivist epistemology to inquire about how men and women 313  
 266 understand and explain their social world. Methodological- 314  
 267 ly, constructivism aims “to identify the variety of con- 315  
 268 structions that exist and bring them into as much consensus  
 269 as possible” (Guba 1990, p. 26). The study employed three  
 270 methods of data collection—individual interviews, focus  
 271 group meetings, and key informant interviews—with no  
 272 interviewee participating in more than one activity. The  
 273 individual interviews allowed us to obtain in-depth infor-  
 274 mation about the spiritual journeys of a diverse sample.  
 275 Focus groups had the advantage of eliciting information  
 276 from a targeted sector of informants whose group dynamics  
 277 stimulated each other’s production of ideas (Morgan 1997).  
 278 Interviews with key informants generated knowledge from  
 279 persons with particular expertise. Our primary method of  
 280 data collection was in-depth face-to-face interviews. The  
 281 two other methods were used to supplement, complement,  
 282 and triangulate findings from the interview data (Denzin  
 283 1989; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). We describe each of these  
 284 methods next.

285 Individual Interviews

286 *Sample Selection*

287 The interview sample was purposeful, consisting of 48  
 288 *baalei teshuvah* who were stratified by gender and years of  
 289 commitment to an Orthodox life. We stratified the sample  
 290 by gender because we anticipated that men and women  
 291 would have different perspectives based on the different  
 292 roles they play in traditional Judaism. The purpose of  
 293 stratifying the sample by years of being observant (2 to  
 294 12 years vs 13 years or more) was to ensure that the sample  
 295 included some people who were early in their spiritual  
 296 developmental process and others who potentially were  
 297 further along. We required a minimum period of observance  
 298 in order to ascertain that all participants were sufficiently  
 299 committed in their decision to become Orthodox, and  
 300 considered 13 or more years long enough to normalize  
 301 one’s religious life and become integrated into a religious  
 302 community.

303 The criteria for inclusion in the interview sample were  
 304 that they (a) self-identify as *baalei* or *baalot teshuvah*, (b)  
 305 have lived in the USA most of their lives, (c) have been  
 306 observant for at least 2 years, (d) were born into homes in  
 307 which at least one parent was Jewish, and (e) were willing  
 308 to participate. In addition, we sought a sample that was  
 309 diverse with respect to identification with different streams  
 310 of Orthodox Judaism (e.g., Modern Orthodox, yeshivish,  
 311 Chasidic) and were living in one of three East Coast target

cities or their surrounding metropolitan areas. We chose  
 these criteria to minimize regional variability that would  
 occur if we drew a sample from the entire country and to  
 maximize variability within the sample.

*Recruitment of Sample*

Using contacts of our own and those of additional research  
 staff, we employed snowball sampling to recruit partic-  
 ipants from the three metropolitan areas. Because some  
*baalei teshuvah* are not open about their status as *baalei*  
*teshuvah* and there is a religious prohibition against gossip,  
 we asked the individuals who gave us the names of  
 potential interviewees to obtain permission for us to contact  
 them. The project coordinator conducted screening inter-  
 views with all potential participants in order to determine  
 whether they met the criteria for inclusion in the sample,  
 our targets with respect to gender and length of time  
 observant, and our desire to obtain a sample that repre-  
 sented diverse sectors of Orthodox Judaism. The screening  
 form was also used to collect sociodemographic informa-  
 tion about participants.

*Sample Characteristics*

As planned, the interview sample is comprised of 24  
 females and 24 males. The age range is from 31 to 58 years.  
 Half of the men and half of the women have been observant  
 2 through 12 years; the other half has been observant  
 13 years or more. As Table 1 shows, the men and women  
 are similar with respect to age, years of observance, marital  
 status, parental status, education, and other variables. They  
 are predominantly young and middle aged adults who are  
 well educated. The professions of the men and women (not  
 shown in the table) are also similar. The participants are  
 doctors, lawyers, psychotherapists, teachers, scientists,  
 human service workers, administrators, and other special-  
 ized occupations. (Table 1) There are some numerical  
 differences between the genders in the streams of Orthodox  
 Judaism with which they identify. We note, however, that  
 these streams are not membership groups with discrete  
 boundaries. The participants struggled during the screening  
 interviews to designate a specific stream, with some coming  
 up with idiosyncratic categories or combinations. For  
 example, one respondent used the term “Chasidic” together  
 with two other categories to convey a spiritual orientation.

*Interview Protocol*

In order to learn about their spiritual-religious changes, we  
 asked participants to draw a spiritual timeline early in the  
 interview. Like McAdams (1993), who asked participants  
 in his studies to divide their lives into chapters and to label



Sex Roles

t1.1 **Table 1** Comparison of women and men in interview sample in frequencies ( $N=48$ ).

t1.2 Characteristic	Women ( $n=24$ )	Men ( $n=24$ )
t1.3 Marital status		
t1.4 Married	21	23
t1.5 Separated	0	1
t1.6 Single, never married	3	0
t1.7 Age		
t1.8 Mean years (S.D.)	46 (7.4)	45 (7.7)
t1.9 Range	31–58	32–58
t1.10 Highest level education ( $n=47$ )		
t1.11 High school	1	1
t1.12 Some college	0	3
t1.13 College graduate	10	7
t1.14 Master's	6	6
t1.15 Law degree	2	3
t1.16 Ph.D.	2	4
t1.17 M.D.	2	0
t1.18 Parental status		
t1.19 Has child(ren)	21	24
t1.20 No children	3	0
t1.21 Religious movement of childhood home		
t1.22 Reform	8	5
t1.23 Conservative	12	14
t1.24 Traditional	1	0
t1.25 Reconstructionist	0	1
t1.26 None; secular	3	4
t1.27 Spouse is baal (or baalat) teshuvah		
t1.28 Yes	17	17
t1.29 No	3	3
t1.30 Other (convert to Judaism)	1	3
t1.31 INAP; not married	3	1
t1.32 Number of years observant		
t1.33 Mean (SD)	14 (8.8)	15 (9.3)
t1.34 Range	3–30	2–38
t1.35 Current Orthodox stream		
t1.36 Modern Orthodox	12	8
t1.37 Right of Modern	5	1
t1.38 Right wing Orthodox	1	2
t1.39 Yeshivish	2	2
t1.40 Chasidic, Lubavitch	0	3
t1.41 Chasidic, not Lubavitch	0	2
t1.42 Combination	0	2
t1.43 Other	4	2
t1.44 Don't know	0	2

359 them, we asked interviewees to divide their spiritual-  
 360 religious lives into time periods with titles. The process of  
 361 writing and/or drawing the timeline helped guide partic-  
 362 ipants through the interview and refreshed their memories.  
 363 We asked them to describe what their life was like during  
 364 each time period, focusing on important relationships, their  
 365 religious life, and community involvement. In addition, we  
 366 inquired about the individual's earliest memories of God,  
 367 religion, and spirituality; spiritual struggles; identity  
 368 changes; and integration into the Orthodox community.

The interview protocol and informed consent form were 369  
 approved by the internal review board of the university. The 370  
 consent form gave us permission to audiotape the inter- 371  
 views and ensured that the names and other personally 372  
 identifying information would be kept confidential. As an 373  
 additional protection of confidentiality, we hired tran- 374  
 scribers who resided in different cities from those in which 375  
 interviewees lived. 376

*Procedures* 377

The interviewers, located in the three target areas, were 378  
 trained either in person or by telephone by one of the 379  
 authors. This fostered consistency across interviewers and 380  
 the elicitation of rich qualitative data. One of the authors 381  
 and another interviewer pre-tested the research instrument. 382  
 After the other two authors listened to the tapes and 383  
 consulted with the interviewers, the three authors decided to 384  
 maintain the same format that they had originally devel- 385  
 oped but to eliminate some questions to keep the interview 386  
 shorter. 387

Participants were interviewed in their homes or work- 388  
 places. Interviews took, on average, between one and two 389  
 hours. In appreciation of their sharing their experiences, we 390  
 gave participants gift cards to either a bookstore or Jewish 391  
 gift shop. 392

Focus Group Interviews 393

Two focus group meetings were conducted with Jewish 394  
 professionals who were *baalei teshuvah*. The first, which 395  
 took place during the first year of the study, was with eight 396  
 participants, six men and two women, who were profes- 397  
 sionals in health, mental health, and education. Their ages 398  
 were from 31 to 61 and they had been observant 11 to 399  
 35 years. The second, conducted 10 months later, was with 400  
 ten mental health professionals, eight women and two men 401  
 who were 28 to 57 years old and had been Orthodox from 402  
 10 to 38 years. Both focus group meetings were conducted 403  
 at professional conferences by the same husband–wife team 404  
 of mental health professionals. The interview questions, 405  
 developed by the authors, had to do with the decision to 406  
 become observant and subsequent spiritual development 407  
 and social integration. The focus group interviews were 408  
 tape recorded with informed consent and transcribed. 409

Key Informant Interviews 410

In order to obtain the perspectives of individuals who had 411  
 direct expert knowledge about and professional experience 412  
 working with *baalei teshuvah*, we interviewed ten key 413  
 informants. The sample of eight men and two women 414  
 consisted of rabbis, wives of rabbis, therapists, educators, 415

416 and *kiruv* (outreach) workers from the same general 467  
417 geographic areas as the interviewees. We asked the key 468  
418 informants what attracts people to Orthodox Judaism, the 469  
419 issues *baalei teshuvah* struggle with, possible differences in 470  
420 the struggles of men and women, patterns of movement to a 471  
421 higher spiritual level, and the integration of *baalei teshuvah* 472  
422 into the wider Orthodox community. All of these interviews 473  
423 except one were conducted by telephone. The two authors 474  
424 who conducted these interviews wrote summary narratives 475  
425 describing the content of the interviews. 476

#### 426 Qualitative Data Analysis 477

427 Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser and 480  
428 Strauss 1967), data analysis of the individual interviews 481  
429 was concurrent with and followed data collection. The 482  
430 authors became familiar with the contents of the interviews 483  
431 through reading the interviews as they were transcribed and 484  
432 by writing summaries and analytic memos on each 485  
433 individual. The memos included ideas about theoretical 486  
434 issues and other aspects of the interview that were salient. 487  
435 The authors discussed some of these interviews as a 488  
436 research team, generating the contents for these memos 489  
437 collectively. 490

438 Team discussions were enriched by our diverse insider- 491  
439 outsider positionalities. Two team members identified as 492  
440 Orthodox Jews; one had always been Orthodox whereas 493  
441 another was a *baalat teshuvah*. Both had extensive 494  
442 interactions with *baalei teshuvah* and non-*baalei teshuvah* 495  
443 Orthodox individuals and with non-Orthodox secular Jews 496  
444 and non-Jews. Another team member identified as a 497  
445 Conservative Jew. An outsider to Orthodox Judaism, she 498  
446 also was also familiar with the outsider perspectives of 499  
447 mothers of *baalot teshuvah* from prior research. This author 500  
448 also had a partial insider status as the mother of a *baalat* 501  
449 *teshuvah*. All three researchers had been trained, either as 502  
450 clinicians or as an anthropologist, to monitor their own 503  
451 biases. Consistent with the advantages of an insider status 504  
452 that are discussed in the qualitative research literature (e.g., 505  
453 Merriam et al. 2001; Shah 2004), insider status gave us 506  
454 access to a sample and enabled us to understand *baalei* 507  
455 *teshuvah*'s language, ask meaningful questions of the data, 508  
456 and project an authentic cultural understanding. 509

457 As a preliminary step to the gender analysis, one of the 510  
458 authors reviewed the analytic memos to identify gender 511  
459 issues that were alluded to or discussed and, together with 512  
460 another author, chose topics that potentially pertain to both 513  
461 men and women. Next the author conducting the initial 514  
462 review re-read and took descriptive notes on all transcribed 515  
463 interviews, organizing the notes according to the topics of 516  
464 spirituality, work, learning and language issues, religious 517  
465 behaviors, and a "miscellaneous" category. This was done 518  
466 first for the men and then for the women. Based on these 519

notes, two authors wrote analytic statements that identified 467  
themes within each gender and between them. Later they 468  
discussed each other's interpretations and came to a 469  
consensus on the meaning of the findings. This process 470  
resulted in the identification of another topic within the 471  
"miscellaneous" category, community. 472

A number of steps were taken to ensure that the notes 473  
taken by one author were "trustworthy" [a standard that 474  
constructivist researchers use in lieu of reliability and 475  
validity (Lincoln and Guba 1985)]. Another author re-read 476  
and took her own notes on the interviews of a random 477  
sample of four men and four women on the same topics as 478  
those taken by the other author. Although one or the other 479  
author had more details in her notes, the contents were 480  
similar. Recognizing that "No two investigators ever 481  
observe the same phenomenon in exactly the same way" 482  
(Denzin 1989, p. 245), we feel confident that our notes 483  
were convergent. In addition, the second note taker re-read 484  
the interviews in which there were no notes taken on certain 485  
individuals in relation to work and spirituality, clarifying 486  
the reasons for the omission of notes (e.g., not working 487  
because of retirement). This is a form of "negative case 488  
analysis" that also supports the trustworthiness of the data 489  
(Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 309). 490

With respect to the two focus group sessions, two of the 491  
authors debriefed with the facilitators after each session to 492  
obtain their impressions of the content and process of the 493  
meetings. Subsequently, each of the three authors listened 494  
to the tapes and/or read the transcripts. The project 495  
coordinator then organized transcribed participant 496  
responses question-by-question, and identified themes that 497  
were related to responses to each question. Next, the three 498  
authors collectively discussed the transcripts and the 499  
analysis, adding additional interpretations that we recorded 500  
in minutes. We engaged in a similar process with the 501  
narrative summaries of the key informant interviews and 502  
the project coordinator's analysis. 503

In order to triangulate findings in the individual inter- 504  
views with those in the focus groups, two of the authors 505  
reviewed the transcripts, the project coordinator's question- 506  
by-question report, and minutes on our team discussions. 507  
To triangulate findings with the key informant interviews, 508  
we re-examined the narrative summaries, report, and 509  
minutes of our team discussion. In both cases, we identified 510  
whether, where in the transcripts or narratives, and how the 511  
participants discussed spirituality, work, learning and 512  
language issues, religious practices, and community. Two 513  
of us noted places where responses were similar to or 514  
different from those in the individual interviews and 515  
subsequently discussed and integrated our findings. 516

We note that the original focus of this research was on 517  
the process of spiritual transformation. Except for the key 518  
informant interviews, conducted in the final year of the 519

520 study, we did not inquire specifically about individuals’  
 521 feelings or thoughts about gender. This has advantages and  
 522 disadvantages. It is advantageous that the themes that we  
 523 identified emerged from participants spontaneously. Had  
 524 we inquired directly about gender, we might have heard the  
 525 “official story” conveyed in Orthodox communities that  
 526 women are naturally spiritual and more innately suited for  
 527 domestic than work roles. The disadvantage of not asking  
 528 about gender is that some people did not address gender-  
 529 related topics at all. We tried to capture themes expressed  
 530 by a noticeable number of individuals.

531 **Results**

532 The results are organized by topic, beginning with  
 533 spirituality and then moving into contexts in which gender  
 534 differences may become manifest. We have varied the order  
 535 of presenting the findings on women and men under  
 536 different topics, discussing the gender that treated a  
 537 particular topic more extensively or intensively first. Here  
 538 and there the authors have included statements to help the  
 539 reader understand the Orthodox context.

540 **Spirituality**

541 Participants in this study were told orally and in consent  
 542 forms that this research is concerned with the spiritual  
 543 transformational processes of adults who become Ortho-  
 544 dox. Rather than presenting individual interview partici-  
 545 pants with a specific definition of spirituality, we  
 546 encouraged them to interpret the concept themselves. The  
 547 definitions the men and women used coalesced around  
 548 feeling connected to God (Hashem).

549 All of the women had much to say about spirituality,  
 550 God, or both. Only one of the 24 women distanced herself  
 551 from the term spirituality, but she said that her friends  
 552 consider her spiritual. The women spoke about feeling  
 553 God’s presence, believing in God, praying to God, talking  
 554 to God, and being very focused on bringing God into every  
 555 aspect of their lives. They spoke of having had spiritual  
 556 feelings since childhood or of being attracted to a universal  
 557 spirituality. They associated their early spiritual feelings  
 558 with nature, religious observances or ritual objects, and  
 559 particular family experiences that heightened their aware-  
 560 ness of life and death. For example, Cynthia, who is 47 and  
 561 the daughter of a mother who was hidden as a child during  
 562 the Holocaust, said that she always felt connected to God.  
 563 She grew up hearing her mother say, “It’s such a miracle  
 564 that we’re alive! And look at the sun shining!” During and  
 565 after college, four women explored diverse forms of  
 566 spirituality such as yoga, Native American practices,  
 567 Eastern religions, and meditation and one experimented

with Christian spirituality. After they embraced Orthodox  
 Judaism, they connected with God through Jewish study or  
 “learning,” prayer (*davening*), music, and/or community  
 service (*chesed*, acts of loving kindness).

Susan, who is 35 years old and identifies with Modern  
 Orthodoxy, exemplifies women who seemed to be naturally  
 spiritual and have built upon this orientation in their  
 journeys. She recalled her parental home as happy and her  
 family as warm and nurturing. Through her family’s home  
 observances and synagogue involvement and her experi-  
 ences at a Jewish day school, a Jewish summer camp, and a  
 youth group, she became increasingly observant. Susan’s  
 family nourished her spirituality. For at least 7 of the 24  
 women, however, spiritual questions were sparked by early  
 trauma. For example, Yehudis, who is 39 years old and  
 defines her stream idiosyncratically as “BT Orthodox” (BT  
 is an acronym for *baal teshuvah*) reported that she was  
 abused by her father and raised for the most part by a single  
 divorced mother whose home she viewed as “empty” and  
 “sad.” As a young adult, Yehudis repeated early traumas by  
 entering into an abusive relationship with a man. Then she  
 started practicing *siddhi* yoga, followed a guru, and found  
 her way out of the abusive relationship and into one with a  
 Jewish man whom she married. Later she and her husband  
 searched for a comfortable place within Judaism, finding it  
 6 years ago in Orthodox Judaism.

Six of the 21 married women reported suffering in their  
 adult years over infertility, problem pregnancies or deliver-  
 ies, or the death of a close relative or friend that resulted in  
 spiritual growth and the deepening of spiritual connected-  
 ness. For example, Diane, who is 58 and Modern Orthodox,  
 recalled that after her child survived against odds after a  
 premature birth, she realized “that there has to be something  
 somewhere that’s looking down and blessing me with this  
 child.”

The term spirituality had a different resonance for more  
 than a third of the 24 men we interviewed. Four expressed  
 discomfort with the term spirituality or denied that they  
 were spiritual. Four different men did not talk about God or  
 their relationship with God. Two others talked about their  
 relationship with God but not in a spiritual way. When we  
 closely examined the men’s interviews, we saw that the  
 men who distanced themselves from the term spirituality  
 acknowledged their connection with God while they  
 directed their attention to the performance of religious  
 rituals and adherence to Jewish law. For example, Shmuel,  
 an ordained rabbi who stated that God is “in charge,” said  
 that he is “not a very spiritual person,” but rather engages in  
 religious behavior because he believes that it is “the right  
 thing to do.” Yet, Shmuel said that in observing these  
 practices, “you keep running into ways of having a  
 relationship with God.” Similarly, Barry, who is 46, said  
 that he is not sure what spirituality means and does not

621 think about it much but instead focuses on the “things you  
 622 do” and the “things that you don’t do.” Nevertheless, he  
 623 said, he talks to God “all the time.” Likewise, Edward, who  
 624 is 42 years old and identifies as “just Orthodox,” described  
 625 himself as “pragmatic” rather than spiritual. Yet he  
 626 discussed God as “this spiritual force that ... does have  
 627 meaning in the world and that we have to, you know, we  
 628 have to *daven* (pray) to, that we have to direct ourselves  
 629 to.” The men who did not talk about God or their  
 630 relationship with God tended to have an intellectual  
 631 orientation toward Judaism or were focused on the  
 632 performance of religious practices. Of the two men who  
 633 did speak about their relationship with God, one said he is  
 634 struggling with this because he does not experience God’s  
 635 presence in his life; and the other, a relative newcomer, was  
 636 focusing primarily on managing the “details” of living an  
 637 Orthodox life. None of the men who were reluctant to use  
 638 the word spirituality or talk about God identified them-  
 639 selves as Chasidic. They described themselves as Modern  
 640 Orthodox, “right wing Orthodox,” yeshivish, combination,  
 641 other designations, and “don’t know.”

642 The remaining 14 men (Chasidic, Modern Orthodox,  
 643 right of Modern Orthodox, yeshivish, and combination,  
 644 other or “don’t know”) spoke more expansively about  
 645 believing in and connecting with God without necessarily  
 646 using the term spirituality. Three spoke of connecting  
 647 through music. Ken, who described himself as Centrist  
 648 Orthodox (“other”), spoke in this way about his love for  
 649 one prayer, the *Ashrei*:

650 ...I remember feeling, in my room... when I said that  
 651 first *Ashrei*, I remember feeling like tingling. Which I  
 652 still feel today.... When I go on vacation, and I’m all  
 653 alone, and I’m staring at a mountain or a river. And  
 654 I’m just by myself, it’s me and God, and I say this  
 655 *Ashrei*, slowly, every word. I will sometimes read it in  
 656 English as I’m reading. It’ll take me a half hour to say  
 657 *Ashrei*. And I will just, you know, the meaning of *Mah*  
 658 *rabu maasecha Hashem* (How great are Your works,  
 659 O God)...Looking at a mountain, or looking at a river.  
 660 And, to this day, in fact we just came back from  
 661 Colorado, and I’ll tell you, two weeks ago I had the  
 662 same feeling. The tingling, great feeling.

664 Three of the 14 men who talked more extensively about  
 665 connecting with God spoke about spiritual yearning and  
 666 struggles and of experiencing divine intervention in their  
 667 lives. Jeffrey, who at 47 saw himself as a combination of  
 668 Modern Orthodox, Chasidic, and New Age, attributed his  
 669 giving up drugs during high school to God’s guidance  
 670 whereas Aryeh, who was 33 and yeshivish, believed that  
 671 spiritual engagement helped him overcome depressing  
 672 thoughts or anxiety and helped him grow. Mark, who was  
 673 51 and described himself as “just Orthodox,” discussed

674 giving himself daily “peptalks” to bring himself closer to  
 675 God and enhance his ability to trust.

676 The findings on women’s and men’s different ways of  
 677 talking about spirituality were supported by comments of  
 678 focus group participants and key informants. One of the  
 679 two men who participated in the second focus group said,  
 680 “I sort of bristle when we use the word spirituality,”  
 681 preferring to talk about being religious. Women in the same  
 682 focus group spoke about loving spirituality and connecting  
 683 to God. Two of the key informants said that women are  
 684 attracted to Orthodox Judaism because of its spiritual  
 685 dimension and two maintained that women are more  
 686 spiritual than men.

Religious Practices 687

688 Both men and women discussed their performance of  
 689 *mitzvot*, which are required observances, practices, or  
 690 commandments. Only men talked about laying *tefillin*  
 691 (phylacteries), putting on *tzitzit* (fringed garments), or  
 692 wearing *yarmulkes* (skullcaps), as these are required of  
 693 men. (Some women in non-Orthodox communities, how-  
 694 ever, perform these *mitzvot* [Diner 2006].) Men who talked  
 695 about the first time they put on *tefillin* or wore a *yarmulke*  
 696 in public spoke about these as momentous experiences. One  
 697 man spoke of undergoing the ritual of circumcision as an  
 698 adult because it was not performed ritually correctly when  
 699 he was a baby. This was a significant event in his journey  
 700 toward Orthodoxy.

701 Several *mitzvot* were mentioned only or predominantly  
 702 by women. Fourteen of the 21 married women talked about  
 703 covering their heads with hats, wigs, or scarves, a practice  
 704 associated with modesty for married women. Among these  
 705 women, four discussed struggling over doing this in the  
 706 past or present. Cynthia, for example, said that when people  
 707 ask her when she will start wearing a *sheitel* (a wig), she  
 708 says, “It’s hard enough for me to just wear a hat now.” Ten  
 709 married women mentioned going to the *mikvah* (ritual  
 710 bath), a *mitzvah* related to family purity that is explicitly  
 711 required of women (Diner 2006), with four of these women  
 712 portraying this experience as spiritually uplifting. Although  
 713 some Orthodox men go to the *mikvah* before the Sabbath  
 714 and festivals, none mentioned this. Six of the 24 women  
 715 mentioned lighting Sabbath candles, with three stating that  
 716 they found this experience spiritually moving.

717 Only women spoke about three *mitzvot* that are required  
 718 of men and women—*chesed* (acts of lovingkindness),  
 719 *midot* (good character traits) and *tzniut* (modesty in dress  
 720 and behavior). Of the 24 women, 4 referred to *chesed* and 4  
 721 to *midot*. Eleven of the 24 women referred to *tzniut*, with  
 722 three mentioning struggles over not wearing pants and two  
 723 finding themselves comfortable dressing modestly. Both  
 724 men and women talked about keeping the Sabbath and

725 keeping kosher as steps in their religious journeys. Only  
 726 women, however, talked about these central religious  
 727 requirements in discussing their current practices. Four of  
 728 the 24 women interviewees talked about the partition that  
 729 separates men and women in Orthodox synagogues  
 730 (*mechitza*) with one asserting that praying from separate  
 731 space was empowering. Two women expressed dissatisfac-  
 732 tion with restrictions on women’s singing in the presence of  
 733 men (*kol isha*), not allowed in the most stringent Orthodox  
 734 streams, and one mentioned struggling over not being  
 735 counted in the *minyan* (quorum of ten).

736 A few *mitzvot* were discussed by both men and women.  
 737 Going to synagogue was mentioned by an equal number of  
 738 men and women, but only women (6 out of 24) talked  
 739 about not liking to attend. *Davening* (praying) was  
 740 mentioned by 11 of the 24 men, with one man stating that  
 741 he needs to focus on this more. This *mitzvah* was also  
 742 prominent for 16 of the 24 women, among whom five  
 743 reported that they struggled with this or should *daven* more  
 744 often than they do. (We note that the expectations around  
 745 davening are different for the two genders. Men are  
 746 required to recite prayers three times a day, preferably in  
 747 a *minyan*. Women are free to *daven* alone. There are many  
 748 opinions surrounding the number of times women are  
 749 expected to pray and which prayers they should recite  
 750 [Kasden 1981]).

751 Participants in the first focus group talked about  
 752 particular *mitzvot* that attracted them and pulled them along  
 753 in their journeys. Consistent with the interview findings,  
 754 one of the two women in that group described going to the  
 755 *mikvah* for the first time as a beautiful experience. In  
 756 contrast, only one of the six men and none of the women  
 757 mentioned *davening*. In the second focus group, one of the  
 758 eight women discussed how working on *midot* (character  
 759 traits) helps her grow spiritually and another spoke about  
 760 enjoying the *davening* on the Sabbath. Another woman said  
 761 that “the *tzniut* thing (modest dress) was so difficult for me,  
 762 was so painful because it really touched...tapped into my  
 763 identity.” The key informants discussed initial difficulties  
 764 men and women have keeping kosher and observing the  
 765 Sabbath. When asked specifically about gender issues,  
 766 eight talked about women’s struggling over the *mechitza*  
 767 (partition), covering their hair, and dressing modestly.

768 Work

769 Twenty-three of the 24 men in the interview sample were in  
 770 the workforce and one was retired. All those who were  
 771 employed made some reference to work. The men had  
 772 academic credentials that enabled them to pursue a  
 773 profession or employment that could provide them with a  
 774 comfortable income, status, and possible external recogni-  
 775 tion (see Table 1). As we will show, the men talked

extensively about their efforts to manage work while living 776  
 a religious life. 777

778 Two of the 23 working men reported that they have had  
 779 to make compromises in either their professional goals or  
 780 religion. Steven, a 58-year old scientist, stated that he  
 781 compromised early in his career when he decided not to  
 782 attend the most prestigious graduate school in his field,  
 783 which had accepted him, in favor of a graduate school that  
 784 was less prominent but was located in an environment that  
 785 was more conducive to his life as a religious Jew. Although  
 786 this decision was made some 30 years ago, he still wonders  
 787 whether he would have been more successful in his career  
 788 if he had gone to the other school. Yonatan, a 32-year old  
 789 college graduate who works in the financial field, implied  
 790 that he made compromises in keeping kosher when he went  
 791 out with clients to restaurants that would not be acceptable  
 792 in his home Orthodox community.

793 Eleven of the 23 working men talked about trying to  
 794 integrate work and religion. In their quest to do so, they  
 795 tended to focus on either work or religion. Paul, a 54-year  
 796 old professor, spoke about directing his energy principally  
 797 into his career. Recognizing that his attitude toward the  
 798 Sabbath is not in keeping with the norms of his religious  
 799 community, he explained that:

800 ...what I worry about religiously is...that in many  
 801 respects...I see *Shabbos*...as good for my work  
 802 because it rests me up so that I can really go back  
 803 into the work world. And I wonder whether I will  
 804 reach a point where...when I get to *Shabbos* I can  
 805 really enjoy *Shabbos* because *Shabbos* is really the  
 806 focus of the week. I think I’ve still got it backwards. I  
 807 think to me work is the focus of the week and on  
 808 *Shabbos* I rest up for the next (week).

809 Nevertheless, Paul tried to integrate work with his spiritual-  
 810 religious life by reminding himself that his professional  
 811 success comes from God.

812 In contrast, 3 of the 23 employed men reconstructed the  
 813 role of work so that it was less important than religion.  
 814 Mark, who at the time of his interview was 51 years old and  
 815 had been Orthodox for 12 years, reported having had a  
 816 number of professional crises over the years. He now  
 817 believes that focusing on career success is a kind of  
 818 “*avodah zarah*” (idol worship) and that instead everything  
 819 in life should be about serving God. Five of the 23 working  
 820 men found the de-emphasis on material success in  
 821 Orthodox Judaism an attractive feature. Yosef, who was  
 822 58 and had been Orthodox for 10 years, said that law “used  
 823 to be my whole life,” but “Now, work is just something I  
 824 do...in order to support my family. And my real, my real,  
 825 entire being is, is being observant and teaching Torah and  
 826 learning, and, you know,...that’s what I’d rather do than  
 827 anything else.”

828 Eight of the 23 employed men described ways in which  
 829 they adapt to working in secular environments. Michael,  
 830 who is 36 years old and has a doctorate, dresses in such a  
 831 way at his company that he stands out as a religious Jew.  
 832 Three other men spoke of wearing a *yarmulke* to work.  
 833 Three additional men described bringing their religious  
 834 values to work by acting kindly toward their co-workers.  
 835 Another man was able to bond with other religious people  
 836 at his worksite. Aside from these eight men, there were  
 837 three men who worked as professionals in the religious  
 838 community where they did not have to make the kind of  
 839 adaptations that those who worked in secular environments  
 840 made.

841 Of the 24 women interviewees, 17 reported that they  
 842 were engaged in full- or part-time paid employment. Three  
 843 women were retired (two for health reasons), one was a  
 844 student, and three were homemakers. Two of the retired  
 845 women had older children and one had school age children;  
 846 the student had school-age children; and all three full-time  
 847 homemakers had pre-school children. Thirteen of the 17  
 848 working women had children 18 or younger living at home.  
 849 In all, 18 of the 21 married women had children under 18 at  
 850 home. As Table 1 shows, the women interviewees were  
 851 well educated. Like the men, they were professionals,  
 852 health and human service workers, and administrators.

853 The women did not talk extensively or with much  
 854 intensity about their work. Only three of the 17 working  
 855 women explicitly said that their careers were important to  
 856 them, but they also indicated that work was not their only  
 857 priority. For example, Danielle, who put a great deal of  
 858 emphasis on her career in her early adult years, reported  
 859 that she had an existential crisis when she was 42 that led to  
 860 her becoming Orthodox. As she explained, in the past, "I  
 861 saw myself as a career person. I would define myself, let's  
 862 say, as a doctor. Now...that's obviously very important to  
 863 me, but um, but I identify myself as an observant Jewish  
 864 woman, with a family, and who's involved with my  
 865 community. And I'm a doctor, too." Sheila described  
 866 herself as having previously been "driven" to achieve.  
 867 Since becoming a mother, she has cycled in and out of  
 868 practicing law and engaging in community service. Two  
 869 additional women indicated that work was important to  
 870 them in the past but not so currently, because they were not  
 871 working. Elaine, whose career in the health field used to be  
 872 central, reported being overwhelmed at home with her  
 873 6-month old baby and that she is going through an "identity  
 874 crisis." She had thoughts about returning to work part-time,  
 875 but worried that a future pregnancy would make that  
 876 difficult.

877 Six of the 17 working women spoke about their desire to  
 878 integrate career and religion, linking both. Their approaches  
 879 were diverse. A psychologist spoke about praying for  
 880 patients and trying to use her relationship with God and

spirituality "in a way that is helpful and healing to people." 881  
 Another woman developed a home-based kosher food 882  
 business. Six other women described working in full or 883  
 part-time in jobs that were aligned with Orthodox educa- 884  
 tional or communal services, connecting the two worlds 885  
 and avoiding potential conflict between them. Amy, who 886  
 once worked as an administrator at a non-Orthodox 887  
 synagogue nursery school, now works as an assistant 888  
 teacher in an Orthodox day school. As she explained, 889  
 "I've tried to put...kindness and the patience...(in) under- 890  
 standing...the children that I work with every day...I try to 891  
 be better with them." She said that she also tries to be a 892  
 better wife and mother. As the examples of Amy and 893  
 Danielle show, it was important for the women to integrate 894  
 career, religion and family. 895

896 Five of the 21 married women mentioned that marriage  
 897 and financial status entered into their career ambitions and  
 898 achievements. Cheryl said that work is less important to her  
 899 now because her husband works. Amy once considered law  
 900 school, but relinquished that ambition in favor of marriage  
 901 when her biological clock was running out. Three women  
 902 reported that they had to work in order to help pay for their  
 903 children's religious schools or other expenses.

904 Five participants in the two focus groups (three men and  
 905 two women) discussed their struggles integrating religious  
 906 observance and work. The men reported changes they made  
 907 over time in their emphasis on work and their commitment  
 908 to learning. One woman spoke about her transition from  
 909 non-observance to observance while working in the same  
 910 job. The key informants, most of whom were men, had  
 911 more to say about men's work than women's. Three  
 912 commented on men's challenges in working and making  
 913 time for daily prayers and learning.

914 Learning and Language Issues

915 Language and learning are integral to entering any new  
 916 culture. Newcomers to Orthodox Judaism have varying  
 917 degrees of competence in Hebrew and hardly any knowl-  
 918 edge of Aramaic, one of the languages of the Talmud.  
 919 Furthermore, there is a body of knowledge and know-how  
 920 that is central to living an observant Jewish life. For  
 921 instance, in the case of the recitation of prayers related to  
 922 eating, one needs to learn which prayers are said over  
 923 which foods before and after meals, in the light of the  
 924 number of post-*bar mitzvah* men present. Considering that  
 925 Judaism requires public prayer and other performative acts,  
 926 mistakes become visible to others.

927 Two-thirds ( $n=16$ ) of the 24 men expressed feelings of  
 928 self-consciousness, inadequacy, or insecurity over their  
 929 deficiencies in Hebrew and/or their inability to decipher  
 930 Talmudic texts. For example, Leonard spoke about feeling  
 931 that he knows less than the "average 6-year old" and Barry

932 remarked, "I had been one of the best educated people (in  
 933 his previous Conservative environment), and all of a  
 934 sudden...I'm an ignoramus." In response, these men have  
 935 worked on increasing their skills through focused study of  
 936 Hebrew or Aramaic and learning specific prayers. Paul  
 937 pointed out that during the early stages of his journey, he  
 938 had little knowledge of Hebrew and thus prayed in English.  
 939 He recalled having been taken in hand and tutored by a  
 940 rabbi of a small synagogue:

941 I remember spending a great deal of the year...  
 942 learning (with)...a rabbi in a little tiny shul....So I  
 943 went over to his house once a week. He would spend  
 944 over an hour with me, teaching me word by word how  
 945 to read the *Shema*. It took us probably a couple of  
 946 months to get through the first paragraph. But I would  
 947 practice, and gradually I was able to say the *Shema*,  
 948 not fluent, but without taking an hour....

949 Other men learned or improved their Hebrew by taking  
 950 classes locally or had done so in the past by studying in  
 951 learning institutions Israel. Still the ability to read Hebrew  
 952 does not mean that they understood what they were reading  
 953 or that they could keep up with the rapid pace of Orthodox  
 954 *davening*. Paul talked openly about how uncomfortable he  
 955 used to feel when he was still reading the *Amidah* (silent  
 956 prayer recited while standing) when everyone else had  
 957 moved on. He has since improved his skills.

958 Four of the 24 men expressed pride in their Hebrew  
 959 skills. Nevertheless, each of them as well as five other men  
 960 expressed inadequacies in handling the Talmud. One man  
 961 said that he was learning Aramaic so that he can have  
 962 access to the *Gemara* (discussions in the Talmud). Another  
 963 saw himself as "still not at the point where I sort of would  
 964 like to be...it's like I'm an amateur bike rider; I'm not a  
 965 professional bike rider."

966 In their discussions of their learning, the men described a  
 967 great deal of activity. They talked about attending classes  
 968 (*shiurim*), with one mentioning going to nine a week. As  
 969 one man explained, "Got to play catch up. I'm not  
 970 anywhere near where I need to be." Some learning was  
 971 with specific synagogue rabbis or at outreach programs that  
 972 have the goal of enhancing the education of *baalei*  
 973 *teshuvah*. Even though it is common for Orthodox men to  
 974 learn with a study partner, five men expressed a preference  
 975 for learning on their own. They attributed this to discomfort  
 976 with others or with the adversarial nature of learning with a  
 977 partner. Four men indicated that they are not learning much  
 978 now; two others reported that they struggled with language  
 979 learning and could sit not still during classes. Those who  
 980 were neither learning much nor studying Talmud were  
 981 apologetic about not actively learning. For example,  
 982 Shmuel, an ordained rabbi, reported that he was not doing  
 983 the kind of learning "a man of my stature should" and

984 explained that his teachers at the institution where he  
 985 received his rabbinical training would be disappointed in  
 986 him. Michael said, "I would learn *Gemara* if I could learn  
 987 *Gemara*....I just don't have the skill."

988 In contrast with the men, who talked about their  
 989 inadequacies and feelings of obligation to study, the women  
 990 gave emphasis to how exciting and enjoyable learning is for  
 991 them. Ten of the 24 women spoke in this manner. For  
 992 example, Shira "tries to go to as many women's *shiurim* as  
 993 possible because "that keeps me...revved up and in the right  
 994 direction." Sandra, who has been Orthodox for 10 years,  
 995 said that when she began to immerse herself in learning, she  
 996 was so excited, "I was like a kid in a candy store."  
 997 Orthodox for 7 years, Danielle said that learning makes her  
 998 feel that she is growing. Karen, who has been Orthodox for  
 999 8 years, said that when she first became observant, she  
 1000 "loved" learning and now, "I want to keep learning...that  
 1001 keeps you going." Almost all of the women (19 out of 24)  
 1002 reported that they were taking classes on a regular basis at  
 1003 the time of their interviews or had done so in the recent  
 1004 past. Others stated that they attended classes in the more  
 1005 distant past but now were learning on their own by listening  
 1006 to tapes or reading.

1007 Like 16 of the 24 men, 9 of the 24 women discussed their  
 1008 inadequacies with Hebrew, their limited text skills, and  
 1009 feelings of ignorance. Despite the common feelings, the  
 1010 women did not convey distress over their deficiencies to the  
 1011 extent to which the men did. For example, Diane reported, "I  
 1012 can read Hebrew very slowly, but I can read it at this point,"  
 1013 with a touch of pride rather than unease. Toby, who has worked  
 1014 hard at learning Hebrew, explained that she was not good at  
 1015 languages, whereas Cheryl remarked that she has difficult  
 1016 concentrating when studying Hebrew texts. Overall, however,  
 1017 the women discussed learning as an activity that is stimulating  
 1018 and enhances their lives, rather than a means to remedy  
 1019 deficiencies or to keep up with community expectations.

1020 Besides their intrinsic joy of learning, the women  
 1021 conveyed pleasure with the social contexts in which they  
 1022 studied. They described learning together with their hus-  
 1023 bands at home or with a study partner; attending classes for  
 1024 women; and acquiring informal knowledge from friends,  
 1025 neighbors, and families they "adopted" as substitute  
 1026 relatives. For example, when Sandra moved to her current  
 1027 neighborhood, which is predominantly Orthodox, a neigh-  
 1028 bor gave her "a crash course" on the religious requirements  
 1029 for serving tea on the Sabbath. The women also gained  
 1030 knowledge from families and friends who invited them for  
 1031 meals on the Sabbath; these families answered the women's  
 1032 questions in a comfortable environment and served as role  
 1033 models. Although much learning occurred in social con-  
 1034 texts, this did not preclude learning on their own.

1035 Both women and men talked more about the activity of  
 1036 learning than what they actually learned. Women alluded to

1037 studying the week’s Torah portion and learning laws  
 1038 proscribing gossip. They also learned about the laws of family  
 1039 purity and how to bake *challah* (bread used on the Sabbath).  
 1040 The key informants identified learning as an area of  
 1041 struggle for men, implying by omission that this was not a  
 1042 problem for women. Men in the focus groups expressed  
 1043 feelings of inadequacy over their knowledge of *Gemara* that  
 1044 were similar to those described by men who had individual  
 1045 interviews. A man with a long beard and a black hat  
 1046 expressed concern that people in his own community  
 1047 expected him to know more than he knows because of his  
 1048 appearance. One of the male interviewees conveyed a similar  
 1049 concern about giving a false impression that he is knowl-  
 1050 edgeable. A woman in one focus group remarked, “For a  
 1051 man, it’s very important to feel like he knows what he’s  
 1052 doing” and difficult when he is used to being competent and  
 1053 respected to “all of a sudden, now you’re a neophyte.”

1054 Community

1055 Twenty-one of the 24 women in the interview sample spoke  
 1056 about the salience of community. They talked about being  
 1057 attracted to Orthodox Judaism because of its warm  
 1058 community and of being connected to their specific  
 1059 religious community and to the Jewish people as a whole.  
 1060 Furthermore, the women spoke of service activities that  
 1061 linked them to others in the community.

1062 Joyce said that before she became Orthodox, she resisted  
 1063 yet desired to be part of a Jewish community. Having  
 1064 grown up in a Jewish neighborhood, she appreciated the  
 1065 cultural ties and warmth of living among one’s own people.  
 1066 As a liberal, however, she was uncomfortable with Jewish  
 1067 separatism. After moving back and forth between her  
 1068 separatist and integrationist tendencies, she concluded that  
 1069 she needed and could draw strength from a strong Jewish  
 1070 community. Sandra, who grew up in a family that was  
 1071 active in their Jewish community, felt lonely in the mixed-  
 1072 religion neighborhood where she and her husband and  
 1073 children had been living. The family took incremental steps  
 1074 toward synagogue involvement outside their geographic  
 1075 area, finally moving to an Orthodox neighborhood.

1076 Diane and her new husband moved to a new neighbor-  
 1077 hood after they married. Before then, they were increasing  
 1078 their observance but did not consider themselves Orthodox.  
 1079 They knew that the community was Jewish but had not  
 1080 known anyone who lived there. Soon after they moved,  
 1081 Diane’s husband lost his mother. Diane suggested that her  
 1082 husband ask a neighbor, who is a rabbi, for help forming  
 1083 the daily home *minyan* of ten men, required during the first  
 1084 week of mourning. As Diane explained, her husband

1085 ...went over and knocked on (the neighbor’s) door and  
 1086 said, “My mother just passed away; I’m going to need

a *minyan* here.” And (the neighbor) said: “Not a 1087  
 problem; what else can we do for you? Do you need 1088  
 meals, do you need this, do you need...are arrange- 1089  
 ments made, do you need help...?” They were 1090  
 absolutely unbelievable! 1091

The neighbors’ warmth and responsiveness moved Diane 1092  
 and her husband to embrace their new Jewish community 1093  
 and Orthodox Judaism. 1094

After Sheila moved to a city in the Northeast as a single 1095  
 woman, she dropped in at a gift store owned by an 1096  
 Orthodox family. A friendly person, she developed a 1097  
 relationship with the store owners and was invited to their 1098  
 home for the Sabbath. Sheila reciprocated by inviting them 1099  
 to her apartment and babysitting for their children. This 1100  
 family incorporated her into their community as well as 1101  
 their family. Before long, Sheila was being set up with 1102  
 potential matches. She married someone introduced 1103  
 through this network and now is active in the Orthodox 1104  
 community where her husband had been living. 1105

These are but a few of the numerous examples of the 1106  
 women’s talking about connecting with communities. 1107  
 Besides these illustrations are discussions of ways in which 1108  
 the *baalot teshuvah* participated in and contributed to their 1109  
 communities. Eight of the 24 women mentioned being 1110  
 active in committee work at their synagogues and/or 1111  
 engaging in other volunteer activities that help their 1112  
 Orthodox community. Four said that they engaged in 1113  
*chesed* (acts of lovingkindness, such as visiting the sick). 1114  
 As Cheryl, who has been observant for 11 years, explained, 1115  
 when she was single she participated in community 1116  
 activities to promote her social life. “Now...I’m doing it 1117  
 because it’s a *mitzvah* to do it.” Yehudis spoke of her 1118  
 family’s wiping themselves out volunteering. She said, “It 1119  
 felt so good....We had so much energy and enthusiasm, and 1120  
 we wanted to give, and we wanted to raise money for good 1121  
 causes.” 1122

The 24 men who were interviewed did not talk directly 1123  
 about community as an aspect of religious life that they 1124  
 found absorbing. On the other hand, they did talk about 1125  
 how meaningful it was for them to be part of a *minyan* or a 1126  
*davening* community and to assume leadership roles in the 1127  
 prayer service. Seventeen men referred to various prayer 1128  
 groups that were part of their journeys. Four talked about 1129  
 “making the *minyan*” (being the tenth man, thus completing 1130  
 the quorum) and three spoke of serving in a leadership role 1131  
 in the service. For example, Robert, who had been 1132  
 Orthodox for 22 years at the time of his interview, stated 1133  
 proudly that he served for a number of years as a *gabbai*, 1134  
 who manages the internal functioning of the religious 1135  
 service. He explained that as a *baal teshuvah*, he was 1136  
 initially insecure about his knowledge of prayer. Serving as 1137  
*gabbai* forced him to learn the prayers and helped him feel 1138



1139 “in charge.” Still Yonaton, who has been Orthodox for  
1140 10 years, has is not sure whether he has the “credentials”  
1141 one needs to assume a leadership role at his synagogue.

1142 Twelve of the 24 men mentioned activities in the broader  
1143 religious community in which they were active. One man  
1144 said that he set up learning programs on special topics.  
1145 Three felt confident enough in their knowledge to give  
1146 Torah classes or lecture to community groups. The men  
1147 also helped their synagogues, outreach organizations, and  
1148 religious schools. Clearly, the men were motivated to and  
1149 have contributed to their religious communities.

1150 Strikingly, almost all of the key informants said that  
1151 *baalei teshuvah* are attracted to Orthodox Judaism because  
1152 they seek community. They did not distinguish between  
1153 men and women. The focus group members also discussed  
1154 community as an attraction. A man in one of the focus  
1155 groups spoke about how meaningful it was to him to lead  
1156 services.

## 1157 Discussion

1158 Our findings show a gendering of the terms spirituality and  
1159 community and specific religious requirements (*mitzvot*). In  
1160 addition, the data point to differences in participants’  
1161 constructions of work and language and learning. Men  
1162 experienced a conflict between religion and their work role  
1163 and felt driven to learn as a way of remedying deficiencies  
1164 in their knowledge. Women were less focused on work,  
1165 experienced less role conflict, and were more excited about  
1166 learning.

1167 Both men and women talked about spirituality and  
1168 community, but the women embraced the terms whereas the  
1169 men endorsed the concepts but were uncomfortable with  
1170 the terms. The women’s espousal of the two terms may be a  
1171 consequence of their location in the religious world they  
1172 have joined. In this world, the men dominate the public  
1173 space of the synagogue or prayer group, and women’s  
1174 marital and maternal roles are considered central (Berman  
1175 1973). Both in the writings of sacred texts and in the norms  
1176 of their respective religious communities, men’s religious  
1177 obligations are explicit. Because women are exempt from  
1178 some obligations (Berman 1973), they are left with room to  
1179 decide for themselves whether or not to observe certain  
1180 *mitzvot* and to what extent. The women we interviewed  
1181 responded to the ambiguity around their obligations by  
1182 constructing internal space in which they could express  
1183 their spirituality and by partaking of existing community  
1184 space in which they could express their willingness and  
1185 capacity to contribute to others. Like the women described  
1186 by Kaufman (1991) and Davidman (1991), the women  
1187 enthusiastically embraced the spaces that were available to  
1188 them.

The men identified more comfortably with the “doing” of  
Judaism and practicing “in the right way,” but, for the most  
part, did not openly acknowledge their spirituality. Yet,  
when we carefully examined the men’s interviews, we  
found that they spoke about savoring over particular words  
of prayer, talking to God, and feeling connected to God,  
which sound like spiritual feelings and behavior. It may be  
that the men associated the word spirituality with emotion-  
ality (cf. Pargament 1999), which evokes a stereotype of  
women. The men also seemed reluctant to use the term  
community, whereas the women discussed community  
extensively. Nevertheless, the men talked about how  
important it was to them to be part of a *minyan*, which is  
a prayer community. They also spoke of feeling good about  
assuming leadership roles in the *minyan* or synagogue and  
mentioned various kinds of community activities in which  
they participated. It is not clear why the men backed away  
from using this term other than their conceding that  
community was women’s space (cf. Kaufman 1991).

All the men who identified with the Chasidic stream ( $n=$   
5) seemed comfortable with spirituality. This is not  
surprising as the Chasidic movement is characterized by  
emotional fervor and spiritual vitality (Jacobs 1997) and  
thus would attract people who are spiritually oriented. We  
found, however, that other men who were spiritually  
oriented gravitated to other streams. Thus, we cannot  
conclude that spirituality is the province of a particular  
stream.

We also found a gendering of certain *mitzvot*. Even  
though many of the *mitzvot* are incumbent on both men and  
women, men seemed to emphasize some and women  
others. Some of the commandments that the men discussed  
are clearly required of men (e.g., laying *tefillin*). The  
women discussed *mitzvot* that are expected of them (e.g.,  
lighting Sabbath candles). Women probably gave more  
attention to the *mitzvot* of Sabbath observance and keeping  
kosher because they have hands-on responsibility for  
preparing the family’s Sabbath meals and ensuring the  
family’s adherence to the dietary laws. Many of the  
requirements for both men and women, such as *chesed*,  
*midot*, and *tzniut*, seem to be gendered, denoting qualities  
that attest to a woman’s merit as a woman. The gendering  
of these *mitzvot* that we saw in the interviews may reflect  
such gendering in the non-*baalei teshuvah* Orthodox  
community.

A minority of the women interviewees voiced resistance  
to covering their heads (cf. Topel 2002), to the expectation  
in very stringent Orthodox communities that women refrain  
from singing in the presence of men, and to women not  
being counted in the *minyan*. On the other hand, the key  
informants highlighted women’s struggles with these  
issues, as well as the partition separating men and women  
in the synagogue. Because the key informants worked

1242 primarily with adults who were early in their exploration of  
 1243 Orthodox Judaism, it is not surprising that they talked more  
 1244 about these struggles than the women interviewees, who  
 1245 seemed to have come to terms with these issues by the time  
 1246 they were interviewed.

1247 Our findings on work are consistent with gender role  
 1248 expectations in the larger society, with men giving more  
 1249 prominence to their work identities than the women. The  
 1250 men seemed to be conscious of social expectations that they  
 1251 support their families and achieve success at work, with  
 1252 some men experiencing role conflict over their priorities.  
 1253 They struggled to integrate work with their religious roles,  
 1254 using such strategies as bringing Jewish values into their  
 1255 workplaces, overemphasizing work or religion, and using  
 1256 religious values to justify a lack of achievement at work.  
 1257 Women also tried to integrate their religious and work roles,  
 1258 as well as family roles, but did not appear to struggle the  
 1259 way the men did. The men and women who worked within  
 1260 religious communities were better able to avoid conflicts  
 1261 between their work and religious roles than those who  
 1262 worked in secular contexts.

1263 Considering that this study was conducted after the feminist  
 1264 movement of the last quarter of the twentieth century had  
 1265 permeated American society, one would expect that before the  
 1266 women became *baalot teshuvah*, they had aspirations that  
 1267 were similar to those of the men. Yet, the women, who had  
 1268 comparable higher education and professions, seemed less  
 1269 invested in work than the men, even though most of the  
 1270 women worked. This may be because Orthodox Judaism  
 1271 legitimizes women's family roles and their communality  
 1272 (interpersonal, emotional orientation) over their agency  
 1273 (Bakan 1966), lessening the pressure experienced by non-  
 1274 Orthodox, well- educated Jewish women to actively pursue a  
 1275 career. This gives Orthodox women who wish to "opt-out" of  
 1276 a career (Belkin 2003) validation to do so. An alternative  
 1277 explanation that is consistent with our data comes from the  
 1278 work of Mainiero and Sullivan (2005). According to their  
 1279 "kaleidoscope model," women's career paths tend to be non-  
 1280 linear. During different phases of their careers, they give  
 1281 different emphases to (1) being true to themselves, (2)  
 1282 balancing family and career, and (3) seeking challenges.  
 1283 Balancing family and career was salient for those working  
 1284 women who were married and had children at home.

1285 The status transition to Orthodox Judaism generated a  
 1286 high level of anxiety in the men. Accomplished in their  
 1287 secular education and occupations, they found themselves  
 1288 deficient in their knowledge of Hebrew and the Talmud.  
 1289 Even though both men and women had difficulty with  
 1290 Hebrew language mastery, the men felt self-conscious and  
 1291 vulnerable because their deficits could be observed by  
 1292 others when they prayed in the public spaces of a  
 1293 synagogue or *minyan*. Some dealt with or compensated  
 1294 for their deficiencies by taking on leadership roles, while

1295 one wondered whether he had sufficient "credentials" to  
 1296 assume these roles. Women were aware of their own  
 1297 knowledge gaps but because they are not required to attend  
 1298 prayer services on a regular basis and do not count in the  
 1299 *minyan*, they could pray at home without having to feel  
 1300 embarrassed. The findings that six women expressed  
 1301 objections to attending synagogue and five struggled over  
 1302 *davening* raise questions whether they were using the  
 1303 ambiguity around what is required of them as women as  
 1304 an excuse to avoid activities or situations in which they felt  
 1305 inadequate. Future research could clarify this conjecture.

1306 The men expressed more anxiety than the women about  
 1307 learning, which the men seemed to view as an obligation.  
 1308 They appeared to be driven by the desire to advance their  
 1309 knowledge and skills so that they could more easily fit in  
 1310 with and thus feel more comfortable among those who were  
 1311 raised Orthodox, whose education in the sacred texts began  
 1312 when they were children. Both men and women spoke  
 1313 more about the activity of learning than the subject they  
 1314 were studying. According to Heilman (1983), men's  
 1315 Talmud classes are a ritualized activity that offers many  
 1316 kinds of benefits other than learning, such as fellowship,  
 1317 cultural performance, and social belonging. Only the  
 1318 women spoke about enjoying the social contexts in which  
 1319 their learning took place. This supports our interpretation  
 1320 that the men's learning activities were a reaction to feelings  
 1321 of inadequacy and were remedial.

1322 In contrast to the men, the women relished their  
 1323 educational activities. Using a gender lens, we view the  
 1324 women's excitement as resistance against the Orthodox  
 1325 community's focus on men's learning (Aviad 1983). The  
 1326 women, many of whom have graduate degrees from secular  
 1327 universities, are intellectually oriented. Operating in a  
 1328 religious world that privileges men, the women seem to  
 1329 crave the education they are missing and seek intellectual  
 1330 stimulation and growth. They want to increase their  
 1331 knowledge of Judaism and incorporate it into their lives.  
 1332 Their excitement is shared by other Orthodox women who  
 1333 have been studying sacred texts (Greenberg 2000).

1334 This research extends the findings of social scientists  
 1335 who have researched *baalei teshuvah* by using an interview  
 1336 sample of men and women who have lived as and reflected  
 1337 on their lives as Orthodox Jews. We found that making a  
 1338 status transition to Orthodox Judaism has a differential  
 1339 impact on men and women, creating more anxiety in men  
 1340 than women. The pressures on men to be knowledgeable  
 1341 and perform adequately in Orthodox religious spaces were  
 1342 implicit in Danzger's (1989) study. Like Kaufman (1991)  
 1343 and Davidman (1991), we found that the women do not  
 1344 overtly find their gender roles limiting and they revel in  
 1345 community. We add to their findings by recognizing  
 1346 women's passion for learning, men's self-consciousness,  
 1347 and men's and women's deep spiritual strivings.

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## AUTHOR QUERIES

**AUTHOR PLEASE ANSWER ALL QUERIES.**

- Q1. Aviad 1983; Jacobs 2003 were cited here but appears to be missing from the reference list.  
Please check.
- Q2. Kaufman 1985; Pargament 1997 occurred in the reference list but was not cited in the text.  
Please check.

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