Conflict and Creativity in Jewish Modern Orthodox Girls’ Education: Navigating Tradition and Modernity

by

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Abstract

This study investigates Jewish Modern Orthodox girls’ dissonant, creative and adaptive responses to their religious and gender identities as they negotiate the tensions between authority and autonomy in an all-girls’ high school. It considers how the school, as a socializing agent, plays a role in this development. This study is framed by a post-structural research agenda that explores the complexity of religious practices in modernity, and a feminist post-structural body of research around alternative girlhoods in modernity.

This ethnographic study contends with the notion that the presence of autonomy and other modern values such as egalitarianism, are a necessary challenge to the girls’ capacity to accept religious and patriarchal authority in a self-affirming way. Instead, it found that girls accept or creatively adapt to, and rarely dissent from, aspects of religion’s authority, while still maintaining their expectation of autonomy and egalitarianism. They achieved this state through a complex and creative re-structuring of normative religious categories in their religious lives, rather than through a bifurcation of the competing discourses, as had been posited in previous research. Existing gender norms in Modern Orthodox society reinforced the girls’ lack of dissonance.
Even where girls bifurcated between their religious and social lives in order to maintain each, aspects of creativity emerged. For example, in their non-ritual lives inequality was an anathema, but they were not bothered by ritual inequity. They accepted and even supported their exclusion from certain rituals because they felt it afforded them more, not less autonomy, by freeing them from unwanted religious responsibilities. In this way, they used existing patriarchal structures to achieve what they understood as a personal advantage.

Several themes emerged from this study. First, modern religious practitioners who live within divergent discourses re-form and re-create traditional categories in order to live holistic modern-religious lives within the inherited structures of traditional religion. Second, gender plays a role both in supporting existing norms, but also afford opportunities to challenging them. Third, despite the strong presence of autonomy amongst the girls, dissonance toward religious authority was surprisingly low.
Acknowledgments

“I will sing to God for He has been good to me.”
- Psalms 13, 6

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mainstream Modern Orthodox Judaism embraces modern thought and traditional Jewish learning as epistemologically compatible (Bieler, 2008; Sacks, 1990; Schacter, 1989; Weinberg, 2008). As a result, Modern Orthodox high schools support the active pursuit of both general and Jewish knowledge under the assumption of compatibility, and without concern that they are at odds (Lehmann, 2007). Recent research has begun to question this compatibility, specifically as it relates to the divergent discursive and social practices within each knowledge domain (Brill 2004; Lehmann, 2009, 2010; Segal & Bekerman, 2009). Tensions have emerged where the autonomy and self-determination encouraged in secular learning is seen to be in conflict with the authoritarian assumptions of traditional Orthodoxy (El-Or, 2002; Lehmann 2009, 2010; Stzokman, 2009).

Orthodox Girls’ education, which is often gendered both institutionally and curricularly, faces the brunt of this tension because of the patriarchal and hierarchical structures coming from traditional orthodoxy with modernity’s impulse toward autonomy and egalitarianism. Young Modern Orthodox women are taught the language of ‘individual rights,’ while also being instructed to defer to religious authorities; asked to exercise leadership and self-determination, while also being socialized into traditional structures that tend to essentialize and often domesticate gender roles and identities (El-Or, 2002); given exposure to core religious texts that used to be forbidden to study by women, and are now permitted but often only in superficial ways; and, even when the level of text study is more equivalent to boys’ education, find the impact of gender on pedagogy and the hidden curriculum to be inescapable (Benor, 2004; Charme, 2006; Krakowski, 2008; Safer, 2003). My research investigates what, if any, are the girls
creative, adaptive and dissonant responses to living within and between modern and Orthodox discourses?

The three sub-questions that arise from this broader question are as follows:

a. How do the girls of Yehudia understand their Modern Orthodox lives and practices?

b. How does a dual (modern/secular and Jewish Orthodox) curriculum that supports competing and conflicting discourses affect these girls’ ideas and practices around religious life?

c. How does being female in a discursive space that supports both a traditional patriarchal religious structure, as well as autonomy and egalitarianism, affect the girls’ understanding of and relationship with Modern Orthodox Jewish life?

The presence and impact of these discourses may not always be explicit or verbalized, and rather may sometimes be implicit and poorly conceived of. My methodology therefore aims to tease apart the discourses both available to, and created by girls, in their construction of a Modern Orthodox identity. I explore what it means to be both modern and religious in a self-affirming way, and how Modern Orthodox young women navigate the tension between these two value systems.

1.1: Theoretical Framework

I will be using a post-structuralist theoretical framework, and will be informed by feminist post-structural research, in order to identify and flesh out the various discourses
available to and utilized by Modern Orthodox girls\(^1\). In the process, I combine two areas of post-structuralist research that have generally been explored separately. This first area attends to discourses in modern religious life (Keanne, 1997; Lehmann, 2007, 2009, 2010; Segel and Bekerman, 2009), and has focused on more enclavist communities (Fader, 2009; Jamal, 2005, 2009; Keane, 1997; Mahmood, 2005), where modern discourses often exist in explicit opposition to local ones, and where aspects of modernity are subsumed and re-written within those local discourses. Although Jamal and Mahmood have thought about this intersection, their research contexts were sites that exhibited antagonism toward normative Western values like autonomy and egalitarianism, and limits their applicability to many North American religious education contexts. This is especially the case for those influenced by Protestantism’s individualistic and internalized religious ethos, like the Modern Orthodox site that I studied. Also, following Jamal and Mahmood, I build on a body of research that challenges the notion that religious and traditional social practices are deficient and at the mercy of the autonomy-focused discourse of modernity.

The second area of research concerns the discourses present amongst adolescent girls who embrace the individuating values of neo-liberalism in their rejection of an explicit feminist identity, yet also pursue their individuated and self-empowered agendas

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\(^1\) By post-structuralism I refer to the critique of “universal notions of objectivity, progress and reason,” and the understanding of knowledge as only partial, a partiality that in turn “increases the validity of situated and dialogical forms of knowledge” (Morgan, 2007, 1035). Further, it understands the subject as embedded within the context of social relations, not as a singular, autonomous being (Davies, 1990). In a post-structural context, the subject is provisional, and is dependent on contextual and extrinsic conditions instead of essential and internal ones. This provisional, situated and contextual understanding of the subject allows for new and alternative forms of agency. Feminist post-structuralism similarly sees gender as socially and contextually constructed, and attends to the power relationships that have produced existing social and gender norms, and the way agency challenges and reformulates existing structures to enact new norms.
empowered by a feminist ethic and legacy (Currie et al, 2009a, 2009b; Gonick 2001, 2003, 2006). This framework, and the diverse fields on which it draws, will be particularly generative for my research because it provides a structure to think about the way the discourses Modern, Orthodox and ‘girl’ are re-worked and become mutually entangled in the experience of students who straddle divergent realms.

1.2: Rationale for the study

The most groundbreaking recent study in Modern Orthodox education, and one which is fundamental to my research, is the work of Devra Lehmann (2007). Using discourse analysis, she tracked two competing discourses present in the classroom of a Modern Orthodox high school: what she refers to as a ‘discourse of authority’ (p.14) in a Bible class and a ‘discourse of autonomy’ (p.13) in an English class. In the latter, students were asked to have opinions and were empowered to interpret material, thus placing their individual opinions at the center of the educational framework. This Lehmann calls a discourse of autonomy, which evolves from a conventionally Western version of modernity. In the former discourse, the students’ opinions mattered only in terms of how well they fit with the traditional commentary, whose authority was called upon to adjudicate ‘correct’ answers. Lehmann refers to this as a discourse of authority because the values in this environment prioritize a transmission of knowledge with significance given to the structures and authorities of tradition. In both classrooms, she notes how the approaches teachers took to support each of these modes of learning influenced the messages students internalized about their own roles, purposes and capacities. Ultimately, students could move back and forth between these divergent
modes of discourse, while the school made no attempt to resolve, nor were they even aware of, the tensions this created in religious identity and the way the tension worked against the students’ own religious goals (Lehmann, 2007, 2009, 2010). This study was significant because it diverged from previous work in Jewish education through its use of the concept of discourse, with its post-structural assumptions, rather than rely on normative positivist assumptions about knowledge, which had been the dominant lens for conceptualizing Modern Orthodoxy up until then (Lehmann, 2007). Doing this changed the focus of the researcher, from asking why Modern Orthodox Jews were choosing or not choosing to be Modern Orthodox, to wondering how Jews become Modern Orthodox to begin with. It is also one of the first true studies of the workings of a Jewish education classroom (Pomson, 2011). My work uses Lehmann’s contributions as a starting point.

Ethnographic research on religious education has often focused on the dichotomy and antagonism between authoritarian religious education and secular learning, not only in terms of content, but as a matter of social practices as well (Lehmann, 2009; Peshkin, 1986; Stzokman, 2009). It has also looked closely at the way students’ sense of agency is mobilized against these dominant forces (El-Or, 2002; MacLaren, 1986; Peshkin, 1986; Stzokman, 2009). Yet there has also been a move to complicate this dichotomy and explore what such a move might mean for notions of agency and resistance, autonomy and submission. Peter MacLaren’s (1986) work is an early example of this trend, observing the way Catholic students are at once repressed through their religious education and its connection to socio-economic practices, but at the same time allowed the space to voice a counter-hegemonic discourse to the dominant capitalist one. Fader (2009) and El-Or (2002) explored a re-thinking of this dichotomy in the Jewish ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox
communities, respectively. Both trace the way women in these communities have absorbed aspects of a modern sensibility, such as notions of autonomy and self-expression, but situate their values within a traditional, patriarchal rubric. Mahmood (2005), in her study of Egyptian Muslim women, and Jamal (2005, 2009), in her work with Pakistani Ja’amat women, similarly observe the blending of modern and religious discourses that at first appear to be at odds. A key aspect of Mahmood and Jamal’s analytic framework is their move to decouple resistance from agency in feminist analysis, in a bid to give greater significance to women’s choices within patriarchal and hierarchical systems, and avoid assuming that women in these contexts have fallen prey to false consciousness or submission to dominant discourses. Talal Asad (1993, 2009), Webb Keane (1997), Johannes Fabian (1998) and James Seale-Collazo (2003) have contributed to work in this field as they explore the dynamic between elements like tradition, religion and authority on one hand, and the different influences of modernity on the other. Each paints a novel and nuanced picture, both of which I will draw on to theorize my research site.

I will use this broad research as a framework with which to take up two areas of Lehmann’s study. While Lehmann traced the divergent discourses in Modern Orthodox education and watched students move back and forth between the classroom discourses, she did not research the meaning students made of these tensions in their developing religious identities, or the ways in which the students themselves recombine and syncretize the divergent aspects of the discourses they embody. Like Fader, Mahmood and others, I describe some of the new and hybridized discourses emerging out of the tensions I observed at Yehudia by focusing my study on the girls themselves. For Modern
Orthodox education to understand itself, it must comprehend how its processes are shaping its students in complex and unexpected ways, and what their educational and religious needs may be as a result. This study bears relevance to any form of contemporary religious education, even though it examines a more parochial element of the Jewish community. It will also help clarify the way religious life can exist in contemporary life, and demonstrate the usefulness of deconstructing the oft-assumed dichotomy between religion, tradition or authority on one hand, and modernity, autonomy and egalitarianism on the other.

A second conceptual departure from Lehmann’s work relates to the narrow way in which she defined the workings of the modernity-influenced discourse of autonomy. Autonomy is commonly construed as the capacity to act with independence and self-direction, which in a modern context implies freedom from or resistance towards authoritative constraint, and is thus contrasted with notions of authority. In much of the research I refer to above, autonomy is shown to exist in a complex relationship with authority, such that autonomy becomes part of the way individuals express their adherence, and not only resistance to, authorities. In this study, I investigate the ways in which agency is enacted by Modern Orthodox students who see themselves as autonomous beings, yet also adhere to non-liberal religious frameworks that minimize, limit or even challenge their freedom.

Another interest of this study is how women express agency within authoritative regimes. Informed by Saba Mahmood and Amina Jamal, I try to move beyond the common poststructural expectation that agency is located in resistance to established hierarchies. Their approach extends feminist research on agency where it is challenged by
young women who act with a clear sense of agency, but also have commitments to authoritarian systems (and specifically patriarchal ones) that on their face contradict an agentive sense of self. I thus look at how the freedom young Modern Orthodox women assume (Lehmann, 2009; Waxman, 2004) influences the way they construct their understanding of Jewish religious law (*halacha*), theology and practice, gender roles and expectations, and how it brings them to support or challenge traditional religious hierarchies. By examining how girls’ make sense of normative religious categories this study will bring further clarity to the project of Modern Orthodox education by clarifying the workings of its conflicting discourses, and the ways girls navigate them. It will, I hope, describe the ways in which the Modern Orthodox girls in this study unapologetically embrace those aspects of feminism that empower them on the one hand, yet equally embrace the religious structures that give them an identity and direction on the other.

Finally, this study will build on a body of research that theorizes and challenges the narrow way that researchers have thought about and made sense of religious movements in modernity that diverge from Protestantism’s focus on individual faith experiences as a primarily internal commitment, in order to give heteronomous religious practices greater legitimacy. Modern Orthodoxy is a unique site to explore a contemporary practice of religion as it embraces both terms (the modern and the orthodox/traditional) explicitly. By openly embracing both the modern and traditional and much of what they imply, Modern Orthodoxy generates an opportunity to view the interactions between its two commitments, and do so in a context close to the normatively modern values of North American society. By looking closely at a Modern
Orthodox community, this study has the potential to benefit Modern Orthodox girls’ capacity to articulate their own diverse femininities within a traditional Jewish context.

The Modern Orthodox community is one that struggles with the notion of feminism (Hartman, 2007). At one level, as a movement that embraces modernity, Modern Orthodoxy is open to modernity’s feminist impulse and ethos. Yet the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of Modern Orthodoxy often feel threatened by its demands (ibid.). This puts young women in a complex position, at once imbued with a modern spirit of autonomy and individuality, and yet loyal to a discourse that often places them in a subservient position. My research will help make sense of the options, both practical and conceptual, that may be open to these young women as they negotiate this terrain.

While Mahmood and Jamal occupy one ‘side’ of feminist poststructuralism in their analysis of religious women’s agency, there is an ‘other side’ of the spectrum that will equally inform my analysis. As part of the Modern Orthodox girls’ creative capacity to negotiate in the borderlands between the discourses of autonomy and authority seems to develop out of the gendered curriculum and teaching to which they are exposed, my research will be guided by the literature on single-sex girls’ schools (Gallagher, 2000; Taylor et al, 1995) and the recent studies on ‘girl power’ (Currie 2009a, 2009b; Gonick, 2006). This literature tracks the divergent feminist discourses open to young women in today’s Western-influenced and neo-liberal cultural milieu, which will be helpful in making sense of the discourses available to girls in Modern Orthodoxy. The literature on ‘girl power’ is particularly relevant for the way it draws attention to how young women
are at once influenced by feminist discourses and refuse to identify as feminists,\(^2\) a similar phenomenon to what El-Or found in her study on Modern Orthodox university women in Israel (2002). This non-identification seems to come about because young women see themselves fundamentally as choosing individuals, which Currie attributes to the influence of neo-liberalism. This is similar to what Devra Lehmann (2010), in her research on Modern Orthodox students, called an “unyielding sense of their own autonomy” (p. 308), which was at the root of their Modern Orthodox identities. This research will provide a lens with which to analyze Modern Orthodox girlhood as a particularly modern discourse, by which I mean a discourse which sets a strong sense of autonomy and self-expression as central. This will demand retracing how girls construct, or rather, re-construct, their notions about orthodoxy and the authorities (God, halacha, patriarch) by which they abide.

In summary, in the course of this study I attempt to more deeply investigate and more broadly define the discourses traced by Lehmann in a conventional Modern Orthodox classroom, by explaining the nexus between traditional and modern discursive traditions, their mutual impact, and the different ways they are mobilized in this interaction. This is accomplished by means of reference to research on the discursive opportunities available to religious girls and women, as explored in the broader feminist-poststructural tradition.

**1.3: Research context and methodology**

\(^2\) A commitment to feminism can mean a wide variety of things. In this context I am simply making reference to feminism’s overall liberatory impulse, separate from any particular social, political or intellectual commitment.
The site at which I conducted this research was a Modern Orthodox Jewish girls’ high school in an east coast Canadian city. I will henceforth refer to the school as Yehudia. Yehudia has a full dual curriculum of Jewish and General Studies, and as an institution, aims to prioritize both equally. I chose to study the twelfth grade cohort. They are the oldest students in the school, and there was a consensus amongst the staff that they are a mature and thoughtful group.

My research design had two tracks. One followed a semi-structured interview protocol, particularly focused on students (See Appendix A) but inclusive of staff. I also conducted participant observation in classrooms and other spaces around the school (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). As part of the interviews, as well as a group text-study, I drew on McClelland and Fine’s notion of release points (2008) and Jo Anne Dillabough’s use of historical images as a way to articulate a genealogy of gender (2008). The ‘images’ I used were texts based on previous graduates’ reflections on their experiences at Yehudia (and the associated boys’ school for the gender contrast), the use of ‘release points’, and a Talmudic text that depicts a Rabbi’s wife challenging her husband and the authority of halacha. These methods were developed to help subjects articulate themselves when their experiences did not accord with dominant discourses.

The techniques allowed students to reflect on their experiences at school without having to reveal substantial personal information.

The borderland between discourses in which these girls reside may not be explicit or verbalized, or it may be implicit and poorly conceived of. This is because they are not authorized discourses in Modern Orthodox society, and as such lack clear discursive structures. By drawing on the above mentioned theorists, what I try to makes sense of in
this research site are either new enactments of Modern Orthodoxy for which there is not a common discourse, or discourses of femininity which may not be normative.

1.4: Overview of the dissertation

In chapter 2, I will introduce Jewish Modern Orthodoxy, followed by an exploration of several fields of research that will inform my research site. I will discuss research about modernity and its interaction with traditional religion; religious life for women in modernity, which will include a post-structuralist critique of feminism in contemporary religious life; and finally, a discussion of alternate girlhoods in modernity. In chapter 3, I will explore the methodological dilemmas I faced upon entering my research site, and some methodological choices I made in response. I will also paint an overview of my research site and the study’s participants. This will be followed in chapters 4 and 5 by my findings, which are presented in two over-arching sections. Chapter 4 is devoted to making sense of the girls’ adaptive, dissonant and creative responses to regimes of religious authority, and an exercising of their own autonomy. It also traces how the religious school context plays a role in these responses. Chapter 5 focuses on the specific ways in which gender implicates itself in the Modern Orthodoxy I studied: as a structure that limits girls’ dissonant responses to its authoritative expectations, and as an outlet for adaptive and creative religious expression. Although there is a significant relationship between authority and gender at Yehudia, they have areas that at moments needed to be explored only through one lens or another. As such I have developed them separately, but with an eye to making connections where relevant. Finally, in chapter 6, I bring together my findings to explain why there was such a low
level of religious dissonance at Yehudia despite high levels of autonomy, and the role
gender plays in this dynamic. I will also discuss some of the implications of my research
for Modern Orthodox education, consider the limitations of my study, and suggest some
recommendations for further research.

5: Concluding remarks

In this study I follow and build upon the nascent literature on discourses\(^3\) of
authority and autonomy in the Modern Orthodox educational process. I do this by
utilizing work done in parallel fields of research that looks at interactions between
modern and traditional life, as well as feminist poststructuralist studies in both religious
and contemporary secular life, and I explore the discourses available to and created by
young women in a Modern Orthodox school. This kind of research is important for the
following reasons: 1) To help bring clarity to its Modern Orthodox female participants
regarding their educational choices and experiences; 2) to articulate and make sense of
the workings of religious education in contemporary life; and 3) to expand the ways that

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\(^3\) I will be using the word ‘discourse’ here, not in its narrow sense as referring to speech
between two people but in its broader sense, having to do with broader properties of
culture and the use of language that the culture is expressed through. I draw on Gee for
my approach to the use of this term. “Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting,
valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing that are accepted as
instantiations of particular identities (or “types of people”) by specific groups, whether
families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, business
people of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African Americans of a certain
sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on and so forth through a very long list.
Discourses are ways of people “being like us.” They are “ways of being in the world”;
they are “forms of life”; they are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and
everywhere social and products of social histories. Language makes no sense outside of
Discourses, and the same is true for literacy.” (Gee, 2014, p.3)
Western-oriented researchers think about and understand heteronomous religious movements in modernity that embrace certain aspects of authoritarian structure. For a long time, such experiences have been ‘othered’ by feminists and Western researchers alike (Mahmood, 2005), and have only recently begun to find legitimacy in a modern context. Substantiating this legitimacy will in turn give Modern Orthodox educators stronger grounds upon which to build a workable Modern Orthodox religious life, and find ways to help students navigate the often contradictory discourses embraced by their schools and communities.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this chapter I begin by surveying the literature on Jewish Modern Orthodoxy, not only how it is conceived of in theory, but specifically how it is practiced in North America today. This will provide the context for a description and analysis of Devra Lehmann’s seminal work on Modern Orthodox education, which is one of the pillars of my research concept. Her postmodern analytic lens opens up Modern Orthodox education to a larger field of research that investigates and conceptualizes the interaction between tradition and modernity. This and other studies will provide some direction for further research in Modern Orthodoxy, as well as justify the relevance that studying Modern Orthodoxy has for advancing the field of religious education and the anthropological study of contemporary religious practice. I will conclude by looking at post-structuralist feminist research, its utility in theorizing Modern Orthodox girls’ education, and the opportunities it creates for thinking about the above-mentioned tensions between tradition and modernity.

2.1: An Introduction to Modern Orthodox Judaism

To contextualize my research, a short introduction to Modern Orthodox Judaism is required, along with some of the common issues in Modern Orthodox educational research and practice. Modern Orthodoxy is less a coherent movement, like Reform and Conservative Judaism, and more appropriately understood as either as a cognitive/intellectual project (Bechoffer, 2011; Kaplan, 1979; Ravitsky in Hartman, 2007) or a social/cultural experience (Benor, 2012; Brill, 2004, 2011; Ferziger, 2007). The intellectual and material typologies are analytic or descriptive, and are thus able to capture
two broad swaths of what is commonly cast as Modern Orthodoxy. They do not represent any formal distinction within the Modern Orthodox community itself.

For those who see Modern Orthodoxy as an intellectual project, there is a tendency to see the experience of modernity as a challenge that brings one to re-visit and re-think one’s understanding of tradition (Hartman, 1985; Sacks, 1990). Modern forms of scholarship, historical consciousness and some contemporary values like feminism and social equality (Ross, 2004) all inform this path, with an attempt to lessen the degree of compartmentalization of religion and general knowledge or culture and explore the way these elements fit together naturally and can be ameliorated. A consequence of this approach is an intellectual, perhaps even an elitist practice of Modern Orthodoxy (Bechoffer, 2011), which as a result relates to the cognitive import of modernity, more than its mechanical or material practices alone (Finkelman, 2003).

The second group in Modern Orthodoxy describes those who are practitioners more than ideologues (Bechoffer, 2011). They are far larger in number, less ideological about the integration between tradition and modernity, and more practical or pragmatic about their Modern Orthodoxy (Brill 2010; Finkelman, 2005). For some, their Orthodoxy is found to be increasingly enclavist in nature (Heilman, 2006), and their modern-ness described as more material than intellectual (Brill, 2004, 2011), with the result that they live bifurcated religious/culturally-modern lives (don Yechia, 2005). There is little confrontation or adaptation between the modern and Orthodox domains in this sense, because the modern does not interfere with Orthodox practice, but exists largely in a different realm. This allows for the apparently paradoxical embrace of contemporary Western culture on one hand, and the increasing move toward religious commitment and isolation on the other. Yael Zigler
(2000) explains that the Modern Orthodox students she studied, “were undoubtedly exposed to Western culture, but generally not through the medium of books,” (33) which is to say, not intellectually, but materially. The implication of these findings is that modernity can be sustained by Orthodox individuals as long it manifests only in the material and technical aspects of life. When not encountered as an intellectual project, it does not present Orthodoxy with a difficult conflict of values.

To this end, Lawrence Kaplan, who is a product, practitioner and researcher of Modern Orthodoxy, asks the following:

“[I]s the orthodoxy of the Modern Orthodox Jew, itself, in some sense modern? Does it reflect, in some significant manner the impact of modernity? Or is his Orthodoxy identical, in all essential respects, with the Orthodoxy of his traditional Orthodox brother? (Kaplan, 1979, 440).

The implication is that from the vantage point of the Modern Orthodox Jew, his participation in modernity is limited to technological and material practices, yet he remains religiously the same as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew. That is to say, it is explicitly distinct from intellectually modern influences.⁴

These two categories in Modern Orthodoxy are heuristic, not formal categories, and institutions and schools rarely define themselves as strictly one or the other. Yet they become relevant as analytic categories, helping to make sense of the sites where Modern

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⁴ This, of course, does not mean Ultra-Orthodox religious practices are not influenced by cognitive aspects of modernity. As Peter Berger (1979) writes in The Heretical Imperative in the context of Protestantism, and as Adam Ferziger (2005) substantiates in the Orthodox context, Ultra-Orthodoxy has also become formed in its contemporary iteration specifically through its complicated interaction with, as well as its explicit rejection of many aspects of modern life. The significant point here is that in Ultra-Jewish Orthodoxy all attempts have been made to preserve religion from modern influences, while Modern Orthodoxy is ostensibly open to their interaction at some level. Rather than mere degree of influence, this viewpoint looks at the participants’ openness to what is called a ‘modern’ influence.
Orthodox students are socialized, and the nature of the explicit and implicit messages they receive at school, or its hidden curriculum. They help make sense of what it means for students to ‘do’ Modern Orthodoxy, since both intellectual and the practical impulses of modernity are present in most Modern Orthodox schools. One often finds the ideological approach emanating from the teachers, who are idealistic in their practice, and a material approach from the students, who themselves and their families are less ideological, and far more practical (Ferziger, 2007).

The result of accepting both modernity and Orthodoxy in the same context has had serious sociological implications, and these carry over to educational endeavors as well. Lehmann summarizes the scholarship on the dissonance consistently observed in Modern Orthodoxy, and finds three different but related explanations. One is “compartmentalization, inconsistency and internal contradiction (Heilman & Cohen 1989; Liebman, 1979);” the second is an “increased adherence to practice related to a decrease in internal values or ways of thinking (Don Yehiya, 2005);” and the third is the “appeal of more consistent and isolationist Charedi Judaism (Waxman, 2004)” (Lehmann, 2009, 300).

To resolve the dissonance that comes from participation in a Modern Orthodox world, Modern Orthodox educators and researchers have tried to take the approach of spelling out the objectives of Modern Orthodox education (Bieler, 1986; Sokolow, 2009). In the end, these lists are usually either sufficiently vague as to allow for the diverse theological and halachik (Jewish legal) approaches in Modern Orthodoxy, or are so specific and long-winded that, in their complexity, they overly constrict contemporary expressions of traditional concepts. Such lists are prototypically modern in the sense that they aim to
provide a unified and coherent understanding of what it means to be a Modern Orthodox Jew, and in doing so, limit the ways participants can express their understanding of Modern Orthodoxy.

Devra Lehmann’s (2007, 2009, 2010) ethnographic research takes a different approach to the dissonances presented by modernity in its interaction with Orthodoxy by using the lens of discourse analysis, and as such has significantly departed from previous work done on Modern Orthodox education. In an English literature classroom of a Modern Orthodox high school, Lehmann observed the presence of a discourse of autonomy, whereas in a Jewish Studies Bible class, she found a more prominent discourse of authority. In the former, students were called on to act as interpreters of the text, and stated their positions in personal terms (“I think…”). Lehmann calls this a discourse of autonomy because it evolves from a conventionally Western version of autonomy in modernity that places the individual and his/her independence or freedom from limitation or authoritative influence as the priority. In the authoritative religious classroom environment, students’ opinions mattered only to the degree that they fit into the thinking of traditional commentators and religious expectations. They could not call on their own opinions as having significance in the learning process, with positions being stated as “We think…” with legitimacy drawn on from outside the individual. This she refers to as a discourse of authority, because the values in this environment prioritized a transmission of knowledge and a significance given to the structures of tradition and its authoritative power. In both classrooms, Lehmann noted how the approach teachers took to support each of these modes of learning influenced the messages students were given about their own individual roles, purposes and capacities. Students came to accept these different
discourses, were able to move back and forth between the two, and also learned to ‘talk’ appropriately within each (Lehmann, 2007). However, the teachers and administrators seemed unaware that this tension existed between the two curricula and the pedagogical approaches through which they were presented, despite the difference having been so stark that that Lehmann drew attention to, effectively two different schools under one roof (Lehmann, personal communication, May 5, 2011). These divergent discourses placed the students in the presence of a fractured set of educational messages, and then left them to negotiate the borderlands between the two. She concludes from her research that when students participate in more than one discourse, they have a meta-conscious awareness of the differences and learn to speak between them, rather than simply taking one or the other for granted as the norm. Though these students learn to negotiate the borderlands between these two discourses, through this process the students developed their own syncretized model of Modern Orthodoxy. What Lehmann does not include is an investigation into the way the students understand and make meaning of this syncretization, an issue that I take up in the present study.

Despite her analysis, Lehmann continued to be puzzled by how the students she studied remained religious. She says that, “the implications of this insistence for the students’ continued religious affiliation were unclear to me: even the most religiously committed students were situating themselves within the discourse of autonomy and assuming it would increase their commitment to Judaism, a Judaism that in the Yeshiva High setting was so firmly situated within the discourse of authority” (ibid., 335). Autonomy was at the center of their identities, and yet their religious practice and
commitment to an authoritative structure persisted. Similar to Lehmann, Chaim Waxman observes that:

There is evidence from numerous studies that, in the United States, individuals increasingly arrive at their own religious beliefs. One of the ways in which Modern Orthodox American Jews manifest their modernity is in the realm of self-determination, especially vis-à-vis religious beliefs, and this has had consequences for the nature of rabbinic authority in the Modern Orthodox community. (Lehmann 2011, 11)

Lehmann’s concern ultimately lay in how such a model could continue to sustain communal religious life. I will take up different ways that this question has been answered in the broader socio-cultural and anthropological literature in the next section, particularly the ways in which the kind of autonomy Lehmann observed has in fact been shown in other research to find a place in authoritative regimes. Developing such an approach in a Modern Orthodox context is one of the goals of my research.

Lehmann changes the ground for conversation about Modern Orthodox education by avoiding making modernist assumptions about the potential for integration or the capacity to reach wholeness within a religious identity. She does not, like many before her, critique Modern Orthodoxy on the grounds that it has failed to properly integrate its two constituent terms, with the result of leaving its students confused. Instead, she accepts from the outset that holism and unity are not the goal, and instead observes how students participate in multiple discourses simultaneously, and must move between them. For Lehmann, Modern Orthodoxy embraces at least two discourses in a core way, authority and autonomy, and suggests that an honest acceptance of this situation allows
for the possibility that educators will find increasingly relevant educational goals or processes.

When Modern Orthodoxy is presented, in contrast to Lehmann, as a unified, coherent system, and its practitioners are faced with contradiction and internal tension, the typical outcomes are those she lists above: breakdown, cognitive dissonance, or abandonment. What makes Lehmann’s research powerful is the way in which she locates these trends in the language and interactions of the classroom, showing that these tensions are being reinforced within the Modern Orthodox educational process itself, and not simply in the contrast between religious education and modern culture.

However, there is a shortcoming in the limited way that Lehmann defines and relates to the terms ‘autonomy’ and ‘authority’ in her research. This was in part an outcome of the parameters of her research (looking at classroom discourse), or possibly a result of the limited way in which she theorized these terms. What I mean is that since she limited her study to the classroom observation, and not the discourse of students in their functioning at the borderland between discourses, she was only able to see the discourses operating separately. As such, she could only be amazed by the possibility that her autonomous students could embrace authoritative discourses. Yet it could be that she was limited to this view because she had not theorized the possibility that discourses of autonomy and authority could in some way be syncretized by the students themselves, or, as noted, because hers was less a school ethnography than a study of classroom discourse. I try to account for both these possibilities by having theorized such a space in advance, and developed methods to track it in the field, part of which is my decision to focus on
students, and less teacher, administrator or administrator input, as well as the decision to approach my research ethnographically.

The failure to think about the operations of modernity in Modern Orthodoxy in more complex ways is raised by Tova Hartman, in her study of feminism in Modern Orthodox Judaism. As a feminist critic, Hartman feels that the modernity of Modern Orthodox is not simply too Orthodox, but too modern; which is to say, it upholds a specific type of modernity that valorizes individuality, autonomy and independence, which she specifically contrasts with Gilligan’s notion of relational ethics. In this vein she asks, “when Modern Orthodoxy resists feminism, is it speaking from its Orthodoxy or its orthodox assumptions about modernity?” (Hartman, 2007, p. 14). She wonders why certain values and intellectual trends are easier for Modern Orthodoxy to adopt than others. For example, Modern Orthodoxy has had little problem integrating science or empirical values into its weltanschauung, but more liberatory forms of feminism which question the patriarchal status quo seem to be anathema to Orthodox leaders. She explains this distinction on two levels. On one level, the question is what can be harmonized with traditional principles, a good example being science. What cannot be harmonized, in Hartman’s opinion, is forced to the outside, like feminism. The further question she takes up in her research is – who decides? Hartman thus concludes that the real issue is not about knowledge, but power. Those with power have consigned feminism to the status of irreconcilability with Orthodoxy, and so it is seen as threatening and defensively sidelined; yet empirical science, which has not been seen as a threat to Jewish thought or values, can remain relevant.

Hartman’s research can function as a key to make sense of the trends researchers have
noted in Modern Orthodoxy. There are some disciplines and values that can easily be integrated, or can at least live peacefully within traditional Jewish paradigms. These generally result in a comfortable bifurcated existence for Modern Orthodox practitioners without disrupting their worldview. There really is no confrontation or adaptation between the modern and Orthodox domains in this sense, because the parts of modernity that have been accepted do not challenge Orthodox concerns, but rather exist in a different discursive realm entirely. Science and Torah are an example of this, with the findings of science confined to the material world, and Torah or Orthodoxy assigned to the spiritual world. This allows for the apparently paradoxical embrace of Western culture on one hand, and the increasing move toward religious commitment and isolation on the other, as observed by Zigler (2000). When modernity is not confronted as an intellectual project, but as a technical, mechanical or empirical one, it can be sustained because it does not conflict at the level of values. Thus many practical changes that have occurred for women in Western society, such as increased possibilities for educational and occupational advancement, are acceptable to Modern Orthodoxy as long as these roles do not violate the norms of traditional practice. Yet traditional legal structures and expectations about women’s roles have largely remained in place.

Adam Ferziger believes that this development was possible not because of changes in Modern Orthodoxy, but because of changes in the Charedi/Ultra-Orthodox world. As this group has come to change their positions on, “Israel, advanced secular education, going to college, living as part of greater society and not in fully enclavist zones, and offering woman Jewish and secular educational opportunities on a comparable level to men,” (Ferziger, personal communication, November 17, 2010), Modern Orthodox Jews have
found an increasingly comfortable place within which to find a powerful religious experience, without feeling threatened by modernity’s ‘other’ values as they are increasingly appropriated by an enclavist Ultra-Orthodox community. Hartman offers a more nuanced readings of the discourses of Modern Orthodoxy, and specifically their implications for women and possible feminist discourses.

And yet here is a place where Lehmann’s use of discourse can show its value over the analytic approach of Hartman. Hartman’s suggestion is that Modern Orthodoxy is too ‘modern’, in the sense of being focused on autonomy and individual self-expression. She therefore suggests and advocates for, in light of the work of Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990), an alternate modernity; one that adopts an ethic of care or relational ethics. This approach retains the either/or binary that I move away from in my research, and which Lehmann leads us toward by being attentive to discourse. As Talal Asad notes, in modernity, “everyone is dislocated; no one is rooted. Because there is no such thing as authenticity, borrowing and copying do not signify a lack. On the contrary, they indicate libidinal energies and creative human agency” (Asad, 1993,10). The movement back and forth between what is conceived as modern and as orthodox, and the blurring of boundaries between notions of authority and autonomy would be, in Asad’s perspective, part of the reality of living religiously in modernity. He alludes to the unsettledness of the modern project, to the lack of firm roots and stability that the quest for a Modern Orthodox identity strives for, and which Lehmann, through the use of discourse analysis, seems to discount. Asad’s last point above, however, is key: This very unsettledness and movement are what allow our creative and adaptive decisions to be made.

Unstable movements are what allow religious practitioners to bring together disparate
inheritances and new experiences, including the divergent discourses of Modern Orthodoxy, and expressions of femininity within Orthodoxy.

I now explore possible conceptions of what exploring a modern religious project for young women might look like by drawing on a broader literature that has been attentive to these trends, followed by an analysis of multiple conceptions of femininity in modernity and in orthodoxy.

2.2: Conceptualizing modernity and tradition in interaction

There is a growing field of research about religious life in modernity that has informed my conceptual framework in two ways. First, I look at research on alternative modernities, or how certain conventionally modern concepts find themselves changed in traditional societies. I use this as a way to re-think the binary between modernity and tradition, which Lehmann categorizes as authority and autonomy, and the way other terms considered normatively modern (e.g. egalitarianism) have found themselves situated within authoritative discourses. Secondly, I draw on work done in research on women and feminism in traditional and illiberal contexts, and the challenge that female religiosity in modernity presents to prevailing notions of autonomy. These notions will be explored a second time in the last section of this chapter when I take a closer look at issues of feminism through a post-structural lens. Both research areas will help unpack the binary that the terms modernity/autonomy and tradition/authority usually imply, as well as trace new relationships between them as a way to shed light on the Modern Orthodox situation.
Paul Rabinow suggests that it is impossible to define modernity. Instead, “what one must do is to track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 7). The notion of modernity commonly mobilized in Modern Orthodoxy, and described in the previous section, understandably draws upon larger normative views. Normative conceptions of the modern individual include a “desire for unity, coherence, totality and equilibrium,” (St. Pierre, 2000, 484); a “self-determining, unified, rational, sovereign subject,” (Lather, 1991, 87) or a “notion of a coherent, unitary, or stable self… that posits the complex and necessary interconnections between reason, autonomy and freedom” (White, 2002, 4). Foucault (1982) understands modernity as a process which forms subjectivities through individualizing and totalizing discourses. Reason, totality, a liberated and self-determining autonomy, and the goal of unity are the common themes. Heteronomy, dependence and guidance are, by implication, signs of immaturity and limitation (White, 2002, 5).

These normatively modern values create binaries or hierarchies that “reward identity and punish difference” (St. Pierre, 2000, 484). This happens because in the desire for unity and reason, modernity’s own ambiguities are covered up. In this process, religion, as an entity both revelatory and authoritative, becomes defined as illegitimate (Asad (2003) in Jamal, 2009). In Modern Orthodoxy, the modern impulse often prioritizes and valorizes a discourse of autonomy over against a discourse of authority and heteronomy, and yet maintains the expectation that an autonomous being will find unity in her religious experience (Lehmann, 2007, 2009). The same assumption applies to the discourses of femininity that are possible within this space. Adopting the above-mentioned set of values for Modern Orthodoxy (Sacks, 1990; Hartman, 2007) at once
prevents a space within which other paths are possible (Lather, 1993), and forecloses particular, “possibilities for action in the world” (Brown, 1992, 16), a troublesome implication for religious practice in modernity.

One can see the way that these modern paradigms reward individuality and punish difference in Webb Keane’s research on the Dutch encounter with the indigenous Sumbanese inhabitants of Sri Lanka (Keane, 1997). In the indigenous worldview, agency is seen as lying not only within human hands, but rather as shared between the people and the deity. This heteronomy is seen as deficient when viewed through a Western (Protestant) lens, in which autonomy is the highest form of spirituality, but is necessary and valuable in the Sumbanese cultural framework (Keane, 1997; Mahmood, 2005). In the Protestant missionary’s interaction with the indigenous Sumbanese, Keane notes the missionary’s inability to make sense of the indigenous people’s lack of division between subject and object, a binary that the missionaries themselves took for granted. This epistemological division, he says, is based on the modern Protestant idea that religion is a set of beliefs to which an individual (subject) must assent, and is therefore about choice, and thus external to the chooser (object). For the Dutch missionaries, agency is something internal and individual. However, when the Sumbanese fetishize objects through a ritual language, they imbue them with agency, which is not internal but draws on ancestral authorities. This observation substantiates the difference between a Protestant-influenced worldview that focuses on individual expression, and the worldview of many non-Protestant religions that extend meaning laterally to others in the community, or horizontally to the divine or one’s ancestors. This question equally presents itself in the Modern Orthodox context where various authorities (divine, biblical,
*halachik*) play a role in the way individuality and self-expression come to be understood, yet do so in a Protestant-influenced culture that values individual expression in religious practice.

Even where Protestant religion is not present, many of its semiotic beliefs have become part of the secular notion of what it means to be modern (Keanne, 1997). This leaves religious experiences that demand some form of heteronomy, such as those Mahmood (2001, 2005) documents in a Muslim context, as well as much of Orthodox Judaism, at odds with a strict division between autonomy and authority/heteronomy.\(^5\)

Brown similarly notes that commonly modern conceptions of terms like autonomy and authority are often used in their Protestant Christian sense, where freedom means freedom from constraint (Asad, Brown, Butler & Mahmood, 2009). In Islam, however, belief is inscrutable except by God, and therefore what matters is social practice, or relational behaviors, and therefore is not about constraint. This valorization of action over belief is common to Judaism as well (Kellner, 1999; Twersky, 2003) through the practice of *halacha*.

An extension of the Protestant notion establishing negative freedom as a religious value, Brown notes, is an approach that is not Muslim or Jewish, both of which are religions that assume commandedness as preceding individual will, which allow one to

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\(^5\) I do not mean to imply here that authority and heteronomy necessarily co-exist, for they often do not. Rather, that when autonomy is assumed, the presence of some form of authority does imply heteronomy. Thinking differently about this structure, as Mahmood does, and as I describe below, opens up ways to observe and make sense of agency in new and important ways. Particularly, it means looking at the subject as formed from the outside, for the way in which the actions and rituals performed by the body form a subject (Mahmood, 2005), rather than thinking about ritual as either pragmatic or meaning something transcendental, or in Turner’s terms, signifying a larger ritual process (1969).
flourish (Asad et al., 2009). Yet even the meaning of commandedness is complicated in modernity, since much of Modern Orthodox Jewry has inculcated the Protestant viewpoint Brown describes as part of their religious weltanschauung (Sacks, 1990). For Brown, this occurs because there are times when dominant discourses begin to inauthentically frame minority discourses. However, if we turn back to Asad’s notion that there are not inauthentic expressions of tradition in modernity, only new and creative formulations that arise from the contestation between various discourses, what needs attention in a context like Modern Orthodox is not the degree to which outside influences have undermined or threatened traditional belief, but the ways in which new discourses have changed the groundwork for how that belief is understood today.

Talal Asad offers one way to think about these new formulations within a religious framework which can ameliorate how this tension can come to be resolved. He says that debating and discussing tradition are integral elements of the Islamic tradition itself, rather than being attempts toward its reconstitution (Asad et al, 2009). Modern Orthodox Judaism places a similar value on debate. From this point of view, dissent and dissonance can denote continuity, rather than disruption. Mahmood, explaining Asad, says that,

Tradition, viewed in this way (i.e. Asad’s) is not a set of symbols and idioms that justify present practices, neither is it an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary or modern. Nor is it a historically fixed social structure. Rather, the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted. (Mahmood, 2005, 115)
This ameliorative property within the tradition itself can collapse the binary of tradition and modernity. Hirchkind, in his research on the tensions between modern and illiberal societies, similarly sees the retrieval and maintenance of traditional practices as giving them a new life and novel form, an act of re-creation rather than a strict attempt to re-live the past in the present (Mahmood, 2005).

In a different way, Amina Jamal traces the way the Jaamat women in Pakistan, who advocate for a traditional Muslim practice, want to ‘domesticate’ the modern within a religious discourse, yet not suppress it entirely (e.g. to re-appropriate the public and political space as a moral one, to fight for women’s rights but specifically distance themselves from a Western feminist framework) (Jamal, 2009). She says that, “many scholars, including Muslim feminist scholars, present their argument in a manner that often reinscribes rather than disrupts the dichotomy between tradition and modernity,” (p. 58). She rejects the “division of the world into zones of traditionalism and modernity, particularly in questions related to women (and) religion…” (ibid.). While some feminists see the Jaamat women’s movement as impediments to cultural progress, it is not accurate to say that they are against modernity, only that they have another vision of it, for they unhesitatingly describe their goals as modern. Jamal thus concludes that her research goals are, “(to) avoid re-inscribing a simple framework of universalism-versus-cultural particularity and instead attempt to understand their religious agency in their own terms as an unfolding universality that may sometimes reject, sometimes replace, and sometimes redeem the universality associated with the discourse of ‘the modern.’” (p. 26).
Johannes Fabian (1998) extends another notion found in Asad (1993). He says that the tensions between tradition and modernity exist in a process that is neither controlled by tradition nor modernity, but by both contemporaneously. This leaves an understanding of autonomy and authority more determined by circumstance and context, and difficult to establish as a set of abstract and fixed terms. Fabian notes that,

“…whenever the occasion arises to consider relations between culture and freedom, it has been common in modern anthropology to align freedom with the individual and culture with the collective. But that cannot be the only way to relate these concepts to each other. Culture can be the source of individual freedom in situations of collective oppression, and the most significant achievement of popular culture may be to create collective freedom precisely in situations where the individual freedom is denied or limited.” (1998, 19)

A focus on individuality does not necessarily guarantee freedom, and on the community one’s submission. Freedom is contextual, and a person’s sense of her own autonomy may be as much of a constraint on her freedom as it is empowering, a concept Mahmood (2005) makes very clear amongst her Mosque women and Jamal (2009) with the women of the Jaamat. In an Orthodox school that values community, rabbinic authority, divine authority, and traditional text, I explore the ways in which communal and authoritative structures can allow for rather than limit positive, constructive freedom even as they digress from a liberal notion of unrestricted, negative and autonomous freedom. I also explore how the authorities that some see as binding are changed in their interaction with modernity such that they no longer function as limitations on autonomy, but in a much more complex relationship to it. This freedom, in contrast to the negative freedom of the bourgeois, liberal individual subject
needs attention in a study of religious education (Jamal, 2005). Fabian continues:

“If freedom is conceived not just as free will plus the absence of domination and constraint, but as the potential to transform one’s thoughts, emotions, and experiences into creations that can be communicated and shared, and if ‘potential’, unless it is just another abstract condition like the absence of constraint, is recognized by its realizations, then it follows that there can never be freedom as a state of grace, permanent and continuous. As a quality of the process of human self-realization, freedom cannot be anything but contestatory and discontinuous or precarious. Freedom, in dialectical parlance, comes in moments.” (pp. 20-21)

This exploration has yet to be undertaken in Modern Orthodoxy, even as theoreticians of Jewish culture and education have just begun to articulate its presence. Jon Levisohn (2013) recently noted in this vein that, “what we see around us, among contemporary Jews, is just what the historians of Judaism see, only more so: evolution, diversity, adaptation, innovation, and assimilation of external influences in the service of cultural vitality” (p. 58). In this sense, Lehmann’s contrasting of authority and autonomy are really contrasts of a very specific notion of both (i.e. liberal Western notions of individuality and negative freedom) that may look different if the terms could be more deeply considered using some of the insights explained above.

One aspect of the influence of modernity on religious life has been a developing awareness of religion as historically evolving and socially contingent, and impacted by the subjectivity of reason (Berger 1979; Sagi, 2008; Wasserrman 2008). These elements have become explicit assumptions in non-Orthodox Judaism, which have led to many changes in the religious practice of these movements (Tucker, downloaded on March 13,
2014 from www.rabbinicalassembly.org; Kaplan, 1981). Once religious practitioners become conscious of the way ideas and practices are part of an historic flow and development, and understand the roles individual and subjective reason play in religious decision making, religious practitioners begin to see the potential for them to take an active role in making religious life happen in new ways, advocate for change proactively instead of organically, as well as rationalize why the religious system as it has developed is no longer relevant in its existing form (Sagi, 2008).

In Ultra-Orthodox, and even right-wing Modern Orthodox circles, the historical contingency of religion and the subjective role of human reason as determining factors are formally eschewed, as they detract from their understanding of truth and certainty about religious dogma (Berger, 1979). Torah is portrayed as embodying a series of ahistoric principles and values that are not subject to critical revision (Sagi, 2008; Heilman, 2006). Even halachik decision making, which is understood as being processed through human beings, is seen as being endowed with da’as Torah, a kind of Divine insight that preserves the absolute and transcendent truth of Torah and halachik practice (Cohen, 1984; Salomon, 2012; Kaplan, 1992) despite its human construction.

In the Modern Orthodox community thinkers are struggling with an awareness of the social and historical contingency of traditional religion. Some are open to thinking about how Modern Orthodoxy can come to terms with these challenges (Brill 2004, Hartman, 1985; Sagi, 2008; Ross, 1993, 2004). While much of this work has been done on the conceptual level, there have been only small forays into the empirical (Segal 2011; Lehmann 2007, 2009, 2010; El-Or 2002). These have begun to reveal some of the complexity that results in Modern Orthodox schools in practice, with this study
representing another step toward developing such empirical data. In my time with the 
girls of Yehudia, I observed how the premises found in Ross, Hartman and others moved 
from conceptual understandings of Modern Orthodoxy, to a manifestation in the girls’ 
discourse in ways that appear conceptually discontinuous, and even contradictory. This 
reorganization of religious categories emerges primarily from the tension between 
divergent discourses experienced in a Modern Orthodox cultural system (El Or, 2002 – 
e.g. authority, autonomy, feminism, egalitarianism and patriarchy as primary amongst 
them). Jon Levisohn (2013) observes, in this regard, that there is a tendency to 
dichotomize between, “internal Jewish cultural dynamics and those influenced by 
external factors. The former tend to be characterized in terms of continuity and 
authenticity, the latter in terms of reactivity and assimilation. But these are false 
dichotomies, because every cultural phenomenon participates in and borrows from the 
broader cultural context,” in a dialectical fashion (57). In looking at the relationship 
between authority and autonomy in the religious lives of the Yehudia girls, what will 
emerge will be just such a reorganization or borrowing between the different cultural 
systems that these girls occupy.

Devra Lehmann’s study (2007) as noted above, observed a discourse of authority 
in the Bible class, and a discourse of autonomy in the English class. In contrast, what I 
found was much more complex, and did not abide by these neat divisions. I will explore 
how, through the school’s hidden curriculum and their own syncretic work, the girls of 
Yehudia have found a way to live with a deep level of autonomy in concert with an 
authoritative halachik system, allowing them to retain both, even as each is modified in 
the process. This model exemplifies the “borrowing and copying” in modernity that Talal
Asad points to, and the resultant “creative human agency” (1993, 10) that it takes to create new and unexpected discourses. It also challenges the assumption that the consequence of a strong sense of autonomy will mean the rejection of systems of authority, as a binary either/or position. Structurally this reflected what Fader (2007) found amongst the Chassidic women in her study. She describes the way in which modernity’s notion of autonomy has imbedded itself within their authoritative religious system by having members of the sect ‘choose’ to submit themselves to God and halacha. While the balance of authority and autonomy looks very different at Yehudia, the notion of mixing or syncretic work better reflects my observations than a divided set of discursive practices as in Lehmann’s research.

2.3: Research in the study of religion and religious education

Taking the approach described above challenges the binary often found in religious education research, where authorities (institutional, individual or divine) are seen as impeding upon autonomy and identity-formation, and are therefore cast in oppositional relations with individuals who resist these ‘systems’. This tendency is most salient in Alan Peshkin’s God’s Choice, and in a more nuanced way in Peter McLaren’s well-known Schooling as a Ritual Performance.

Peshkin (1986) spent two years at a Christian fundamentalist school and its attached community, and described its authoritative and indoctrinating educational approach. He also chronicled the ways in which students were able to enact agency within this hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian environment, finding measures of agency within the system, much as Willis’ ‘lads’ do in Learning to Labor (1977). Peshkin clearly depicts
the way the school and its religious values contrast with cultural American modernity and its normative value set. Despite the students’ involvement in popular culture, the school itself, unlike a Modern Orthodox school, had a singular and enclavist religious vision which excluded conventionally modern influences, both cultural and intellectual. Peshkin’s work is an important early ethnography of religious schooling for the way it details how students find their own ways to make sense of the tensions in their religious and cultural life, and where they look for spaces to do this border-crossing. Yet in Peshkin’s analysis, the binary of freedom versus autonomy remains intact; freedom is discovered outside religious control, and submission to authority within.

Elana Sztokman’s (2009) research looks at the problems of teaching Judaism in a state religious school in Israel. She addresses common concerns about how religious education proceeds – namely that it is too linear, formal, teacher-centered, and transmission based, and has an excessive focus on practice and religious absolutes. She is critical of the system’s focus on transmitting a rigid set of ideas, rather than on development toward personal complexity and consideration of process. Sztokman’s line of reasoning is common to those who favor a liberal, autonomous and student-centered education that values negative freedom, and who see little value in the positive freedom or the possibilities for action and identity creation offered by communal and authoritative structures of traditional religion. This parallels Peshkin’s observations about the authoritarian tendencies of religious education and the binary this observation supports.

Peter MacLaren’s (1986) work adds a layer of complexity to the assumption that authoritative regimes in religious education in modernity are necessarily limiting. As a critical theorist, he was interested in the ways that religious education became aligned with
dominant socio-economic forces, and the way that religion became a model for controlling students’ lives. Like Peshkin, McLaren understands religious education as part of the institutional structure that reinforces dominant ideologies and values. But here, McLaren’s work takes two interesting turns. Utilizing a Marxist critique, his focus is on the material implications of modernity, and less so its cognitive effects. Thus, religious education in many ways serves to reinforce the students’ socio-economic status. Yet at the same time, he notices how spaces for religious education become one of the few places in which students learn to challenge dominant socio-economic discourses. Religion does not only play the part of ‘making’ these students accept a certain socio-economic status, but also adopts a counter-cultural position that places it at odds with some of modernity’s hegemonic, capitalist values. The public school system has, for McLaren, bought into the dominant neo-liberal discourse, leaving the religious classroom as the only forum in which to question it. By drawing attention to the complex and even contradictory ways in which discourses can be accessed, McLaren challenges the binaries that often pervade discussions of religious education, such as those visible in Peshkin and Sztokman.

James Seale-Collazo (2003) conducted a study of a unique research site, a Protestant Evangelical high school in Puerto Rico, that has relevant implications for my study, and helps me theorize a religious space that adheres to multiple commitments (2003). Seale-Collazo looks at two aspects of school life that exhibit contrasting notions of freedom. One is the individual’s challenge or resistance to the social/hierarchical structure in their personal relationship with Jesus; the other, the freedom and restrictions found within the Church structure itself. The school institutionally supports both approaches, and yet strives and struggles to find a balance between the two. The Modern
Orthodox institutional context, in contrast, is somewhat less obvious in its intentions. The dual curriculum structure of Modern Orthodox schools implicitly supports the interaction between a personal and individual religious life on one hand, and a dedication to the community and its traditional structures on the other. However, that support is limited by two factors: by the degree to which it is aware that a dual curriculum contains a tension that needs ameliorating, and by the degree to which as a consequence it is able, or willing, to find a way to educate toward this complexity. Yet as Seale-Collazo points out, an awareness of these tensions on the school’s part may not lead to its amelioration, even as it opens up spaces for exploration – a process Lehmann suggests as a way to resolve the presence of multiple discourses.

2.4: Religious women’s life in modernity

A number of studies have been done about women in Jewish Orthodox contexts, although few have focused specifically on Modern Orthodoxy. Some research has looked at Ultra-Orthodox (charedi⁶) education (Fader, 2009; Kaufman, 1990; Safer, 2003; Wellen-Levin, 2003), and despite the differences, contribute to our understanding of the traditional dynamics in Modern Orthodox schools and the modernity/tradition interaction. There have been few studies of Modern Orthodox women, with the notable exceptions being conducted by Tamar El-Or about university students, and a second recent collection by Elana Sztokman and Chaya Rosenfeld Gorsetman.

Tamar El-Or (2002) studied the phenomenon of Modern Orthodox women’s education in her research on the Bar-Ilan Midrasha, a Modern Orthodox women’s religious

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⁶ The term charedi in Hebrew means ‘one who trembles/fears’ God. It is how Ultra-Orthodox Jews refer to themselves as a sociological category.
educational institution situated in a major Israeli university. Bar-Ilan University is outside Tel-Aviv, and has a standard liberal-arts curriculum which most of the women in the Midrasha study. Separate from their liberal arts degrees, students take optional classes in the Midrasha in topics such as Bible and Rabbinic Literature. Similarly to Asad’s (1993) and Charles Hirschkind’s (in Mahmood, 2005) understanding of the way tradition is re-created as it emerges in modernity, El-or notes that, “the phenomenon of new education for women derives from the tension between the religious world and the modern secular world, this education will not resolve that tension but will instead organize it in a new and different way” (47). For many of these women, being involved in the Jewish learning process, one usually reserved for men, meant a movement from identifying learning as something that polices and restricts them, to one of participation in learning and thus changing their role in the community. The opportunity to receive an education has created the grounds for a positive, constructive engagement with tradition. Through this, modernity’s discourses make their way into the women’s contemporary religious experience and worldview, but often in changed forms that reinforce religious communal goals. She notes that girls conform to a rigid uniform and communal social code, but “insist on constructing an individual experience” out of these authoritative expectations, which is “one more trait of a modern Jewish religious society” (p. 90). This resonates with Lehman’s observation that students of Modern Orthodoxy embrace a sense of their own autonomy as an individual expression, and also, as Yael Zigler (2000) noted, it does not seem to detract from a commitment to communal structures and expectations. The women’s desire for learning in El-Or’s study did not lead them to leave the community, but to enter it more deeply, even if the result was their re-entrenchment in a system that
limited their autonomy in some ways (El-Or, 2002). At the root of this observation is that, counter to Lehmann’s conjecture, an autonomous identity connected to a traditional religious framework need not lead to the autonomous agent throwing off authoritative structures. Ultimately, however, when it comes to research about Modern Orthodoxy girls, Sztokman and Rosenfeld Gorsetman note that, “the discussion of gender issues in education, which has the most long-term and broad reaching implications, has not yet taken place” (2013, p. 23).

Another piece that challenges the authority/autonomy binary is Ayala Fader’s (2007) work on Ultra-Orthodox Hasidic women in Brooklyn. She chronicles the way that aspects of a modern discourse infiltrated the women’s thinking, but not in a liberal, Western way that would emphasize autonomy and self-expression. She says that, “real freedom, progress and self-actualization, Hasidic women tell their daughters, can only come about through the self-discipline that is learned through Jewish religious practice.” (2-3). These women do not view their modernity through the prism of individuality or in contrast to authority, rather they see their autonomy as being actualized in the way they submit to tradition. Fitting into the existing religious structure, not standing out, is the ultimate act of autonomy: “When girls can fit in, when they use their autonomy to fulfill communitarian ideals rather than individualistic ones, they are closer to more moral, past generations of women: biblical women, their great grandmothers from prewar” (p. 39). Autonomy allows for the fulfillment of traditional and authoritative expectations, instead of being the vehicle of liberated self-expression. Modernity has provided “new opportunities for these women to acquire newfound authority in their families, combat inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity, and even reinterpret secular Western feminism to serve women’s religious aims”
(40). These women are not just ‘modern’ Orthodox in the way Peter Berger (1979) describes modern Protestantism in *The Heretical Imperative* (that they face modernity and choose to turn away from it), rather they are Bergerian in a deeper sense. They embrace many of modernity’s values and cognitive features (though not the acceptance of plurality as Berger has it), which allows them to penetrate and become the vehicles to fulfill what they perceive as more significant goals. Autonomy, framed as the agency for fulfilling authority, rather than an individuated and self-referential Kohlbergian autonomy, is their society’s highest value.

This framework is similarly found amongst the women described in Deborah Kaufman’s (1990) work on Ultra-Orthodox women who grew up as secular Jews and intentionally turned away from Western values by embracing an illiberal form of Judaism. In their secular lives they saw a liberal ethic of individuality fall over into meaningless pursuit, a recognition which pushed them to re-imagine their autonomy within a larger communal structure. The women in her study left their secular world because of a feeling of depersonalization, a lack of meaning in their interpersonal relations. They felt themselves caught in the dilemma of twentieth-century individualism, wherein personalism is reduced not only to the private areas of life but to a context where each person is set at the center of his/her own universe. Through the practices of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, its personal practices and social institutions, these women were able to reconstruct their personal lives. The autonomy they learned to value in their secular lives, rather than offering them a sense of freedom, led to a sense of constriction and depersonalization. It was only by placing this value within a traditional patriarchal social structure that they were able to find personal fulfillment. This sense of purpose recalls Mahmood’s (2005) study about Muslim women’s
pursuit of piety within a traditional patriarchal structure. In both cases, it is difficult to claim that the women are working against their own interests, despite a classic feminist critique that they are in fact doing so by embracing a patriarchal system. It seems that there are competing desires at play, some of which can be found within, and others outside of, traditional structures.

One of the lessons from Lehmann is it is not merely what students are taught, but how they are taught and what they are and are not allowed to say that makes a profound impression. Even in environments where boys and girls are taught the same material together, the messages that girls take away are different than those of boys, and those differences track along normatively gendered lines (Charme, 2006). Lois Safer studied the way that textual learning influenced girls’ ideas about their place within the religious community by looking at girls in the sixth and seventh grades at an Ultra-Orthodox elementary school. She wanted to explore the value of reading in the cultural world of the studied community, and using a feminist lens, determine what consequences a specific type of learning has on girls’ identities. She was particularly interested in how reading practices intersected with the formation of self. Safer wanted to assess how girls construct religious identities when their access to particular texts are determined by gender. This meant looking at the status of the texts studied, how they were presented, how students responded to those texts, and classroom discourse.

Safer found that expressions of creative thinking were interpreted as resistance when reading and discussing in class. Most questions girls asked were technical questions, clarifying information the teacher taught. There were fewer challenging questions. As the year went on, there was an increase in technical questions, and a decrease in open-ended and
challenging questions, which Safer identified as one of the teacher’s year-long goals. Not challenging the teacher’s knowledge became a boundary girls learned to accept through the classroom practice. The teacher’s responses to these kinds of questions socialized them toward a certain way of learning texts. This was reinforced by a comment that the principal made to Safer when asked to describe the ideal girls teacher. The principal described this person as someone with a certain type of relationship to the girls, and left out of his description any intellectual qualifications. The teacher’s role, it seemed, was to inspire lifestyle choices as much as educate, with textual learning as a means to that end. While most Modern Orthodox schools will explicitly advocate equal opportunities in religious education, what Safer makes clear is that even when young women are given access to foundational texts, it does not imply that they will find a place in the interpretive process. How this operates in a Modern Orthodox instead of a Charedi context is part of my study.

Sarah Benor (2004) made a similar observation in her study of Ultra-Orthodox linguistic patterns around learning, which, she pointed out, does not apply in the Modern Orthodox community. Benor observed very different patterns in boys and girls learning, patterns that instantiated boys as ‘learners’ and girls as ‘tzedekes’ or righteous women. She gives the example of a time when she asked both classes to debate. The boys chose a legal topic, and the girls a social, though religious one. Boys mentioned texts in their arguments, and girls did not. Benor hypothesizes that this happened because girls lack confidence when talking about Jewish text, as it is not emphasized in their religious instruction in the same way as for boys. In Benor’s work, one sees the way that social context provides avenues for religious expression. I will explore the messaging that happens in Yehudia around religious practice (both gendered and gender neutral), and
how the girls themselves notice and make sense of the differences.

Saba Mahmood, similar to Fader, considers the way aspects of modernity have been restructured in an illiberal context. Mahmood studied the women’s mosque movement in Egypt in the 1990’s, and has taken the challenge of illiberal religious experiences seriously in academic research, specifically as they relate to notions of autonomy and modernity. One of her important conceptual choices has been to de-link the notion that agency is defined by resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal social structures. Instead, she looked at the working of agency separate from its aspect of resistance to authority:

The women I worked with did not regard trying to emulate authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained individual freedom. Rather they treated socially authorized forms of performance as the potentialities – the ground if you will – through which the self is realized…How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality? (emphasis added, Mahmood, 2005, p. 31)

In contrast to agency being conceived of as resistance, Mahmood sees agency as discovered in the act of submission to accepted forms of religious authority. The mosque participants saw authorized models of behavior as scaffolding, potentialities to achieve self-realization, rather than as restriction. For these women, freedom comes through an
embracing of the social and religious structure. This cannot be construed as a form of
liberatory feminism, that is, the notion that these women use the patriarchal structures
toward their own ends, since the women see themselves as embracing the social structure
in order to fulfill its goals, not resist it. The question thus turns on itself: What does
freedom or fulfillment look like when, to achieve its potential, one must embrace or
engage with a particular authority? This question has an important role in Modern
Orthodox educational research, which in the past has relied on tradition or
authority/autonomy binaries. By de-linking agency from resistance researchers may now
be open to an analysis of the Modern Orthodox experience that accounts for the
complicated interactions between its various discourses. Instead of seeing women’s
participation in patriarchal religious practice as an either/or choice between complicity
and submission, Mahmood opens up a lens which sees participation in authoritative
religious structures as valuable toward other ends.

Avishai (2008) adopts Mahmood’s de-linking agency from resistance, but does
not equate Orthodox practice with a form of docility. Instead she sees this practice as a
way to perform an Orthodox identity, one which is constructed in contrast to a secular
other, and which has value for the practitioner as part of her pursuit of religious ends, or
what Mahmood calls ‘piety’. She says that, “by associating agency with observance, the
doing religion approach avoids the false dichotomy that pits compliance and agency”
(Avishai, 2008, 429). I use this novel lens in my research to theorize how young Modern
Orthodox women dually embrace the discursive demands of authority and autonomy.

Mahmood (2005) also uses the notion of *habitus* to make sense of this freedom-
in-authority dynamic. She looks back past Bourdieu to the meaning of the term
developed by Aristotle. For Aristotle, *habitus* means how one actively forms habits or states of being, as opposed to Bourdieu’s notion that there are meta-social formations that form individuals. Aristotle’s orientation is pedagogical, similar to the experience of the mosque women. While Bourdieu’s concern is with the expression of the social structure, Aristotle focused on the capacity-of-self acting in the world. It is not so much *that* one acts, as much as *how* one acts with virtue (intent, emotion, commitment), that is important to ethical development. Action is thus a kind of personal self-discipline. This approach is shared by Modern Orthodoxy, in that value is placed on the action itself (*mitzvah* or commandment) as formative, and not simply as the product of a religious personality (Twersky, 2003).

Drawing on the above studies provides a rich array of possibilities for re-viewing the relationship between authority-related discourses and autonomous ones in religious education. The literature presented serves to establish conceptual grounds for the value that can be generated in re-thinking the relationship between these oft-competing terms, and why doing so remains a reasonable and vital exercise, while not necessarily threatening to traditional practice. This survey of studies in religious education and religious life broadly, and Jewish education and Jewish life in particular, offer numerous models of past research that can inform such an approach in a Modern Orthodox context.

2.5: Feminism, girls, and learning from religion

“Lubavitch culture lovingly nurtures each girl’s developing persona but keeps domains under careful surveillance…. (thus finding) selfhood in the context of tight conformity.” (14)
“Orthodoxy may have something to add to the feminist project, if ‘feminist’ implies the desire to help as many girls as possible grow into confident, secure adults.”(26)

-Stephanie Wellen-Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls*

The distance between the emancipatory tendency of Western feminist thought (part of which derives from a modern discourse), and the traditional, patriarchal and socially conservative values of Jewish Orthodoxy creates, in theory, more dissonance for girls than for boys. This is owing to the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of traditional Judaism, which tend to grant power and agency to men and deny it to women. Yet, many Modern Orthodox women embrace, choose, or at least choose not to reject living within these tensions (El-Or, 2002; Fader, 2009; Zigler, 2000). Understanding how they do so, and what that means for discourses of Modern Orthodox girlhood femininity, not only has important pedagogical consequences, but may shed light on how the overall relationship between authority/tradition and autonomy/modernity are navigated in Modern Orthodoxy. Moving forward I will aim to explore the way Modern Orthodoxy establishes certain dominant modes of femininity, and forecloses alternatives. This will lead into a discussion about the ways that a poststructuralist feminist analysis poses a particular problem for this binary, and finally to the present study of a sample of Modern Orthodox girls.

A feminist lens in a religious study is rare. Saba Mahmood (2005) notes that the questions asked by feminist researchers have recently revolved around the way historical

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7 In some Orthodox communities, not choosing the normative religious life may lead to being ostracized from that community. While I do not have documented evidence to this end, it has not been my experience that those who leave the community are ostracized in any way. That does not mean there is not a stigma or tension associated with leaving the fold, or that social pressures do not have an impact on the nature of one’s choice to accept or reject Modern Orthodox practice - only that it is not an either or decision.
and cultural issues inform the analytics and politics of particular feminist projects. These questions have been approached in many realms; particularly class, race and sexual identities, but notably absent has been the realm of religion (ibid.). This is in part due to the attitude of the modern Western academy toward religion, which manifests as a dichotomy between the liberal values of the West and the illiberal values of faith communities. Amina Jamal (2005, 2009) notes the unwillingness of secular academic feminists to abandon the secular-religious binary and exclusive use of an analytic lens that equates agency with resistance and the dismantling of conventional hegemonic norms.⁸ This may happen, she explains, because in the academy there is an assumption that the religious worldview, and its distinction from a secular one, is understood and therefore does not require investigation. An alternate reading is that the religious perspective is shunted aside and seen as ‘other,’ and as such is not worthy of investigation. Even when investigated, religion is contextualized within terms that are ‘secular,’ so that religion occupies an irrational sphere because it is not autonomous but authoritative (Mahmood, 2005). It thus loses its place in a ‘rational’ academic discourse, and in particular where it presents a challenge to normative emancipatory and liberatory feminist analytics. Jamal (2005) comments that “we need intensely nuanced accounts of the relationships among Islam, women and modernity in a manner that highlights the

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⁸ This absence is notable when Patti Lather (1991), in discussing the challenge presented by poststructural feminist discourses, says that, “lesbians and Third World women pushed feminism away from the assumption that there is a generalizable female experience (and, of course, generalizable ‘lesbians’ and ‘third world women,’”(28)) yet fails to note women’s religious experiences as one of the categories that challenge an understanding of a normative feminist discourse. Of course, Lather was not attempting an exhaustive list; still the absence of religion is, as Mahmood notes, rather common.
specificity of Muslim women’s appropriations of modernity in different contexts of struggle” (p. 58).

The lives of religious girls and their relationship(s) with modernity, which are in part expressed through their relationship(s) with feminism, will be explored in this study not only by looking at the complexity that results from the interaction between modernity and tradition, but the complex ways in which notions such as modernity and feminism themselves are differently mobilized. A post-structuralist feminist framework already provides some guidance for making sense of these strands by helping to clarify their interaction and reconstruction.

2.6: Alternative girlhoods in modernity

Carol Gilligan, in her now classic studies, challenged Kohlberg’s position that autonomy was universally the highest level of moral development (Gilligan et al., 1990). Gilligan instead found that a ‘resonant relationship’ was a girl’s best protection against social and psychological dislocation (Taylor et al, 1995) and that Kohlberg’s categorizing reflected a masculine bias toward independence and autonomy. The independence expected of girls in adolescence only leads to silence, or a compliance with dominant expectations of womanhood. This understanding of girlhood became normalized in popular culture, and often within academia itself, as a way of categorizing girlhood (Gonick, 2006).
A number of authors challenged Gilligan’s relational understanding of girlhood, even as they applauded and supported the way she de-legitimated the universalizing tendency in psychology that preceded her. Wendy Brown draws attention to the way that Gilligan’s insightful observation about the relational approach of young girls is part of a reified and patriarchal social structure, not one inherent to their psychological makeup. Brown’s approach posited that in the Western nation-state, these discourses about women are naturalized (Brown, 1992). Women’s roles as the nurturer and caregiver within the family is deemed ‘natural,’ and as a consequence are essentialized and become unalterable. This means that women’s labor within the family is done silently, because it is expected, and as a consequence of only occurring in a private space, becomes depoliticized. As a result, the family and home become places where there are no ‘rights,’ for rights are only given in a public, not private, civil society. Thus, for Brown, “women develop much of their thinking and codes within and for the comparatively non-liberal domain of the family relationships and needs rather than self interest and rights comprise the basis for female identity formation and decision-making processes” (Brown, 1992, 19). The psychological needs of women are thus re-framed as deriving from a particular discourse of femininity in the modern neo-liberal state.

Marnina Gonick (2006) takes note of a related shortcoming in Gilligan’s thinking. She looked at two discourses of modern girlhood, what she labels Reviving Ophelia and Girl Power. The former labels girls as passive, vulnerable, voiceless and fragile. The latter labels them as assertive, dynamic, and unbounded. She finds it interesting that they emerged at the same time (the 1990s), and links them both to different responses to the rise of the individuated neo-liberal subject; one is the idealized form of the self-
determining individual, and the other, an idealized form of the one who cannot enact the ‘girl power’ form of identity. She connects the Ophelia concept to Carol Gilligan’s notion that girls go through a ‘crisis in self esteem’ in adolescence. Girls, in this discourse, went from being invisible in Kohlberg’s discussion of moral development, to being vulnerable in Gilligan’s.

What both Gonick and Brown raise is the importance of critiquing a normalized discourse of femininity in modern neo-liberal society, as well as the need to look for other discourses of feminine identity; not as a way of evaluating one over the other, but as a way of making sense of how the structures of girlhood are constructed (St. Pierre, 2000) and what options they present girls with. Instead of insisting that girls are one thing or another, a poststructuralist approach can conceive of women as all of the above in different moments and different circumstances (Kenway et al, 1994), an idea that rings of Fabian’s notion of freedom coming in moments. This is important in a Modern Orthodox context, for on one hand femininity in traditional Judaism is generally essentialized (Fader, 2009; Hartman, 2007), and on the other, Modern Orthodox girls are exposed to the discourses Gonick presents, yet in new combinations, as the various discourses interact.

A recent study that makes significant inroads in this respect is the work done by Currie et al on ‘girl power’ (2009a, 2009b). In contrast to Gilligan, Currie and her research team found that girls are individualistic and self-oriented, and not transformative or relational. She draws attention to a popular book by Mary Pipher entitled Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, which encourages girls to “find their voice,” meaning their individual voice and not the imposing expectations of society.
Currie notes that the problem with this charge is that without troubling or challenging what options are available to girls, they may only have available to them “conventional scripts” that are focused on the self and not on “becoming,” whether in relationship or by challenging gendered norms. This focus on individual identity allowed some girls to stake a vision of what they felt they wanted for themselves, including the search for non-conventional scripts of girlhood. Yet the fascinating implication of this individuality was that for these girls, embracing feminism would have been problematic, as it would mean negating the individualism of their choice by participating in a discourse that emphasized communal, or at least social, belonging. This did not mean that they were not influenced by feminism or feminist concerns, only that this happened in implicit and unacknowledged ways. This reinforces Gonick’s point above that the discourses of femininity available to young women have been heavily influenced by a neo-liberal conception of selfhood. This also seems similar to the strong sense of autonomy that Lehmann (2007) found in her students, and which underlies Modern Orthodox identity.

In a study of children’s identities, Bronwyn Davies (1993) was consistently able to find a thread in the narratives she explores showing that “women gain acceptability and perhaps some form of power through self-negation and concern for others” (p. 34). Currie (2007), accepting this, challenges the notion that girls are passive, placing her work within the realm of an emancipatory feminist project. Yet as Mahmood and Jamal are careful to note, passivity can mean a variety of things. To be passive or docile is both negative and stigmatized in Currie’s context, yet there are contexts in which this is not the case, beyond just religious discourses of femininity. Mahmood gives the example of a young pianist, for whom docility, the capacity to sit still and focus on practice for hours
on end, is considered a vital characteristic for success. Thus, passivity must be contextualized for it to be a useful analytic category.

There is a common thread in both Bronwyn Davies’ work on post-structural feminism in elementary schools, and something noted by Saba Mahmood in her work on religious women in Egypt. Davies found a male privileging of the abstract over the lived experience, not only as a matter of school interest, but in the lives of students. Mahmood similarly notes that the women’s *dawa* movement is geared not toward abstract understanding but practical knowledge of daily conduct. In this way they distinguish themselves from the male, scholarly mode. A by-product is that this makes them less threatening to the religious (i.e. masculine) establishment.

In light of this research, it seems reasonable that Modern Orthodox girls, by virtue of their exposure to and embrace of modern discourses, engage multiple and contradictory scripts of girlhood and femininity, ones that support and subvert conventional norms of neo-liberal subjectivity. This interaction is intriguing in light of Currie’s observation that the girls in her study experienced second wave feminism as a ‘restrictive orthodoxy,’ as it prevented the individuality and complexity the girls were looking for, an individuality that was a staple of highly individualistic discourses (Kenway et al., 1994). El-Or (2002) observed the way that young Modern Orthodox women want to push the boundaries of what is acceptable for women to do in religious life, but from within, not against the system. Does this limitation result from the authority of a religious discourse, or because these girls find, like Mahmood suggests, a profound sense of agency in the religious discourses they enact? Are there ways in which these women, who eschew the term feminist, at the same time take up feminism in their
religious lives and identities, and if so, in what ways is this learned within their educational environments?
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methodological Concerns

3.1: Feminist concerns in qualitative research

One of the particular concerns of research that overlaps feminist concerns with illiberal movements is feminism’s two-pronged vision of itself as both analytic and liberatory (Francis, 1999; Mahmood, 2005). It is thus important to distinguish between them in clarifying research goals. In its liberatory mode, a feminist allegiance can become something done for or to those who are not yet liberated (Lather, 1993), and in this way feminism is a particularly modernist project for its universalist assumptions about the need for all women to be liberated from structures of patriarchy (Francis, 1999). This outlook makes it difficult to take seriously and listen to the perspectives of the women like those in Mahmood’s study, and by extension, my own. Of course, at some level the bias of the researcher is a concern to all social science qualitative research (Behar, 1993; Wolf 1992), but particularly so when part of the researcher’s goals are liberatory, and when what counts as liberatory is defined in a particularly liberal, Western context (a commitment that is often the case in academic circles, as Mahmood (2005) draws attention to), laudable as those commitments may often be.

Being aware of the different allegiances that comes with a feminist research methodology means my being conscious as a researcher to bring, as both Mahmood and Lather note, a degree of self-scrutiny when looking at the lives of those who have different commitments than I do. (Behar, 1996; Lather, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Wolf, 1992); or, more germane to this case, being aware of how many of my religious commitments overlap with those of my subjects. As Lather notes, advocacy based research has legitimacy in a post-positivist paradigm as long as it is open about its
ideological commitments (Lather, 1993). This requires a substantial amount of self-
scrutiny and reflexivity on my part as the researcher, an issue which I will address shortly.

Both Marnina Gonick’s deliberately emancipatory study of high school girls, and Currie’s work on girl power, are interesting and relevant cases for this issue, both regarding the way that a researcher has to be aware of his or her own commitments, and the way that girls defy a researcher’s expectations. Gonick found herself challenged to encourage female students to create a magazine that gave them the space to challenge their normative discourses of femininity. Yet what she found was that when given the opportunity, they simply reproduced ‘conventional scripts’. For her to push her liberatory feminism would therefore mean suppressing their interests, even as their interests reproduced dominant discourses. She thus wondered whether what she thought was right might not be ethically or politically right for them. She says that, “My experience working with girls leads me to suggest that, as feminists, we need to rethink our sense of certainty about having ‘gotten it right’ once and for all” (p. 169). On one hand she realized the ethical problem of forcing liberatory notions on her subjects, yet on the other because of her commitments to a liberatory feminism, is hesitant to accept as equally valid the discourses within which these girls operate.

Mahmood wants to push feminist researchers to consider the effects of their liberatory commitments on their research projects, and to conceptualize what non-liberatory feminisms might look like. Gonick, aware of the need to think in this direction, even if only partially, suggests that feminists must come up with a variety of feminine discourses, even some that conform with conventional femininities. She wondered, as her
work moved forward, if the students’ connection to feminism was more ambiguous and ambivalent than she originally suspected, and if there was a way of working with the possibilities this opened up.

Yet there is something inescapable in feminist research about the desire to make some sort of change. One way to think methodologically about this is Lather’s (1993) notion of catalytic validity, that is validity recognized through the impact on the research participants themselves. One way this can be accomplished is by making conscious, and possibly problematizing, what is ‘natural’ or inevitable in the lives of the research participants (Gonick, 2001). Browyn Davies (1993) explores this methodological goal by showing children images of children in different cultures, to create an awareness that ‘childness’ and ‘goodness’ are different in different places. The children made collages of themselves using childhood photos, telling their lives through the photos, so as to begin to see themselves as gendered beings. They were given disposable cameras and told to look for ‘naturally occurring scenes,’ rather than asking people to pose for them. The aim of this project was to create images and to tell stories in relation to those images, stories about their relationships with the people that mattered to them.

Researchers have responded to the need to see beyond conventional scripts in varying ways. I used this approach by having girls respond to a selection of Talmud that challenges normative gender behaviors. Currie and her team, in their research on girls and ‘girl power,’ note the challenge of trying to 'hear' contradiction and inconsistency in girls’ talk as characteristics not of girls themselves, but of processes through which they become girls as they engage in multiple and divergent discourses. Lather (1993) had the teacher in her study respond to the original data and give their interpretation, meeting her
demands for both reciprocity in participant research, as well as creating a process for dialectical theory-building, rather than imposing theory on the observed data. For Gilligan and Taylor, this meant adjusting the interview model so that the narrative account is produced interactively, not based solely on the questions of the interviewer but on the experiences or interests of the participant as well, with attention paid to the social locations of both (Taylor, 1995). I took up Gilligan’s approach in both my interview technique as well as the conversations I had with students around the aforementioned selection of Talmud for study.

Analysis of the semi-structured small group interviews followed Currie et al.’s paradigm of ‘hearing’ contradiction and inconsistency in girls’ talk as characteristics not of girls themselves, but of processes through which they become girls. They describe their approach as follows:

Our first reading identified instances where the speaker positioned herself in relationship to an identity category of her peer culture. Such an instance provides an opportunity to see how Selfhood is accomplished. A second hermeneutic comes into play when incoherence and contradiction threaten to destabilize this Selfhood, as often happened elsewhere in the interview. Thus our second reading attended to ways in which the Speaker maintains a coherent sense of Self in the face of self-contradiction. We call this way of working over transcripts 'symptomatic reading' because it directs attention to processes beyond the text. In our case, it directed our attention to unspoken but ever-present discourses that shape girls’ sense of themselves and their worlds. As we shall see, it also helped
us understand how girls can be empowered through feminist discourse while
distancing themselves from the identity as 'feminist.'

(Currie, 2009b, 384, emphasis added)

This approach both takes the subject at her word at one level, respecting her subjecthood, and probes the various discourses she takes up on the other. It does this, not in a manner that is critical of her inconsistent subjectivity, but as a way to better understand her worldview. I used this approach to probe the ways in which the girls make sense of the divergent discourses of Modern Orthodoxy, not only implicitly in the way they live between the borders of these (and perhaps other) discourses, but also explicitly as they come out in the dialogue.

As part of my research design, I had intended to take up a video project (Gallagher, 2007), in which the students would explore what it meant to be a Modern Orthodox student at this particular school. I asked girls to volunteer to create videos that answered the question, “What does it mean to be a Yehudia student?” My goal was to achieve an understanding of the girls’ firsthand experience, not only giving them a place in the research process (Adler & Adler, 1994; Behar, 1993; Wolf, 1992) and thus helping to achieve triangulation in my research (Adler & Adler, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994), but hoping as well that it would allow the research to make a greater impact on the participants through their collaboration and involvement in the project (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Lather, 1993). Lather draws attention to the importance of this kind of participation in the research process.
For persons, as autonomous being, have a moral right to participate in decisions that claim to generate knowledge about them. Such a right…protects them…from being managed and manipulated.… [T]he moral principle of respect for persons is most fully honored when power is shared not only in the application…but also in the generation of knowledge. (Heron 1981:34-5, quoted in Lather, 1993, 55)

This demand dovetails with the above ethical concern for being explicit about the positioning of the researcher, as well as the overt involvement of the participant in shaping the research (Wolf, 1992).

Only two pairs of girls volunteered to participate in this project, and only one pair completed it. I did review the video with its creators and with a group of students, and will share the results of those conversations as they inform the questions I explore in this study. As for those who did not create a video, their reluctance may have stemmed from the fact that they saw the project as ‘extra work’ in an already burdened dual-curriculum, or perhaps from feeling insufficiently compelled to share their experiences. My suspicion lies toward the former, based on comments made after several interviews to the effect that the girls found it clarifying or relieving to be able to share their thoughts and experiences. The two students who did create a video were primary informants while I was at Yehudia, Daniella and Samantha. They regularly found me, wishing to share their ideas and experiences. They also saw themselves as somewhat outside the norm, and perhaps for this reason, felt more compelled to share their digital vision of the school.

3.2: Ethnography, semi-structured interviews and the need for qualitative research

In order to understand school as primary cultural context in which the girls become
Modern Orthodox, an ethnographic approach to my research site was an important choice. As Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2007) note, “ethnography is founded on the assumption that the shared cultural meanings of a social group are vital for understanding the activities of any social group. The task of the ethnographic researcher is to uncover those meanings” (p. 16). Ethnography also acknowledges that as a researcher spends time at their site, the research questions and hypotheses may develop and change. As noted, one of the assumptions of my study was that some of the discourses I aimed to describe were poorly if ever articulated. As such, a sustained presence and openness to change through the duration of my study was important. This manifested itself most overtly in the case of my Talmud discussions with the girls, and with the question about Shabbat that I will describe below.

I also used a semi-structured interview protocol because of its capacity to make sense of individuals and their social interactions in their complexity (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). The open-ended style allowed me to be circumspect about the categorizations that I was bringing to the project, and helped to prevent me from limiting what I was capable of seeing in the field (Adler & Adler, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994). I used two techniques in these interviews to help vocalize and clarify the nature of the discourses and the girls’ experience, and which seem to be either taken for granted in their lives or have been hitherto unarticulated. The first is called release points, and draws upon the work of McClelland and Fine, and the second is the use of genealogy formulated by Jo Anne Dillabough. Both will be explained below, extending the ideas discussed above around the need to listen carefully to a subject’s voice.
3.3: Release points

Thinking about and identifying the complexity of multiple discourses can be complicated for students (Davies, 1993), especially when they are presented as seamless, as they usually are in Modern Orthodoxy. This can sew confusion and discord within the students, who tend to assume that their confusion is their own problem, rather than an effect of being given a model of Modern Orthodox life that does not represent the social reality they experience (Currie, 2009a). McClelland and Fine’s (2008) notion of release points has relevance in trying to create the awareness in the student about what is going on beneath the surface of Modern Orthodox education, and give voice to an experience of religious life that may not be a conventional and normative one. I do this in a number of ways during the interview process, which I detail in the following paragraphs.

As part of creating my interview protocol, I asked graduates of the school who have taken very different religious paths in life, in part influenced by Modern Orthodoxy’s divergent discourses, to describe an aspect of their educational experience while in high-school. A number of graduates submitted reflections, and I chose one from a male and one from a female that seemed either reflective of a normative school experience, or was more introspective in nature and therefore, I hoped, would be more generative. I then used these vignettes as case studies to help the students make sense of their own experiences. My intention was that this would allow them to name and become aware of dynamics that might not have been obvious to them while they were in the midst of their own experience of school, but that they might be able to recognize in the words of others, without having to criticize or defend their own religious lives and choices.
I also used some of the ‘release points’ Fine and McClelland mention – including ‘facts’ and ‘obvious questions,’ but formulate them around Orthodox Jewish issues. An ‘obvious’ question that I thought would elicit helpful results would be one such as, “Why do boys focus on Talmud?” Such an element of religious life is taken for granted as basic, and as such, is rarely, if ever, questioned. As the project went on, and I observed a surprising lack of rebelliousness against religious norms amongst the girls, which challenged an assumption that I brought as I entered Yehudia. One of my committee members suggested that I ask participants a question about their religious behaviors. I added, “Why do you observe Shabbat?” to my protocol, which resulted in some very generative responses. My intention was also that these release points would help students begin to be aware of the assumptions in their educational environments and the impact they have on the students’ own religious lives and choices. My hope was that beginning to see this complexity could help me understand how they make sense of their situations and how their education contributes to that process.

3.4: Gender in the Orthodox world

Jo-Anne Dillabough (2008) posits ethnography as more than an investigation of the present (inclusive of which are discourses that are used in the present, and therefore constrain possible interpretations), but as a way to “confront the past” and use elements of history to “illuminate the lives and contemporary social circumstances” of her subjects (p. 187). Although her research goals are very different from mine, her approach was illuminating for this study. Dillabough used photographs to access the relationships
between gender and socio-economic disadvantage and draw out these connections for young women.

Instead of photographs, I chose a selection from an ancient Babylonian Talmudic Jewish text (about the 5th century). The Babylonian Talmud, which is a collection of Rabbinic writings edited in about the sixth century CE, and is the basis upon which post-Temple Judaism developed. The Talmud includes what could roughly be described as both *halachik* texts, which deal with Jewish law, and *aggadic* texts, which are the stories and parables from ancient Rabbinic lore, even as the delineation between the two is not always entirely clear, as was the case in the selection I chose.

The Talmud is composed of two different Rabbinic texts. The Mishna, which is the core text, is a collection of short Rabbinic statements, halachik in nature, and edited in the second century. The Gemara, edited in the sixth century, contain Rabbinic discussions recorded subsequent to the editing of the Mishna, whose primary but not sole purpose is to understand the terse words of the Mishna.

The text I used was taken from page 65b of Tractate *Yevamot* and is about a certain Rabbi’s wife and the way she exercises a unique kind of agency within a patriarchal social and religious system. However, in the Talmud itself, unlike how the text is presented here where the Mishna and Gemara are presented together, the Gemara quoted does not follow immediately after the Mishna. Rather, there is a page long discussion about another part of the mishna before this story appears in the text. The text was presented to the girls as it appears below (i.e. consecutively), and not as it appears in the Talmud.

Here is my translation of the Talmudic texts:
Mishna: The commandment to procreate applies to the man but not to the woman. Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka says: [the commandment applies] to them both, as it is written: ‘And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful and multiply”.’ (Genesis 1,28)

Gemara: Yehudit, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, experienced tza’ar leidah (the suffering of childbirth). She changed her appearance and came before Rabbi Hiyya. She asked, ‘Is a woman commanded [by Jewish law] to procreate?’ He answered her, ‘No.’ She went and drank a sterilizing potion. Eventually, the matter became known. He told her: ‘If only you would have borne me one more bellyful.’

A few notes are important on the context of how these texts were shared. In presenting the texts, my focus was on the gemara, which is an agadic text, but understood that the mishna needed to be taught as part of the context, which is halachically oriented. I gave all girls the option to read the text in English or Hebrew/Aramaic, and all chose English. In contrast to the hevruta approach used in traditional gemara study (Kent 2006, 2010; Segal 2011), the texts were learned as a whole group. This was common for gemara classes taught at Yehudia, and so in doing this, I was not deviating from the norm. Finally, I did not give any introduction to the texts, but after reading through them, did answer clarifying questions about what the text meant.

I chose this text because, despite its brevity, many themes in my research can be raised through reading it. It is a story about authority, embodied both in the authority of halacha (as evidenced by Yehudit asking a question at all), as well as R. Hiya himself who operates as a privileged male and halachik decisor. On the other and one observes
the agency enacted by Yehudit when confronted by those authorities. This is structurally very similar to what I look at in the Yehudia girls’ relationships to *halacha* and Torah, and the way they enact agency vis-à-vis these authorities. All of this provides at least possible grounds for the girls to explore or articulate aspects of their own reality, but in terms that are less personal. In this sense, I was also curious how the girls would respond to Yehudit as a strong female figure exercising agency, and how this text challenges traditional gender roles, with Yehudit actively taking what she felt was best for her well-being. This is seen beside the husband’s emotional response at the conclusion of the story, in contrast to his reasoned *halachik* decision earlier on, and the way these reactions are both stereotypically gendered, and challenge gender norms at the same time.

3.5: *Research site*

Yehudia is the girls’ half of a Modern Orthodox, Zionist high school in a large Canadian northeast city, founded in the mid-1970s. There is a separate boys’ campus about two miles away. While the two campuses share an administration and some teachers, they have almost no formal joint programming, and no joint academics. However, many of the male and female students know one another from elementary school, as the main feeder school is co-educational until the fifth grade, but classes are separated by gender after the 5th grade. As well, many of the students attend the same youth groups, Modern Orthodox co-ed summer camp, and the same synagogues. As a result of social ties to the students at the boys wing of the school, the girls I studied have (or at least perceive themselves as having) a great deal of insight into the boys’ experience of their education, including their academic activities and the interactions with
faculty and administration, and are thus able to compare their own experiences to those reported by the boys.

The school’s mission statement, which can be found on its website, says that its primary value is to “inculcate within our students an appreciation for a commitment to Torah observances and values.” As well, the statement refers to the school’s commitment to a “dual curriculum of Jewish and General studies, that would arm our students with the methodological tools needed to become self-reliant in classical Jewish texts and give them a broad-based secular grounding in the classical world disciplines,” affirming the role of secular thought in their mission. It also notes the “centrality of Eretz Yisrael (i.e. the land of Israel) and Medinat Yisrael (i.e. the State of Israel) as a fundamental element of our Torah weltanschauung” (Downloaded on February 14, 2014 from the school’s website). Although the school does not use the term ‘Modern Orthodox,’ its stated values are the defining features of contemporary Modern Orthodoxy (Waxman, 2004).

Yehudia and the boys school combined have a little over 200 students, and the girls’ school alone has an enrollment of just under 100 students. While the Jewish studies teachers at the girls school all affiliate with Modern Orthodoxy in one form or another, the general studies teachers vary from non-Jewish, to secular Jewish, to Modern Orthodox. While the vast majority of students attended the same Modern Orthodox elementary school, a small number came from another school with a slightly more

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9 The school may not define itself as explicitly Modern Orthodox, but instead describe the commitments of their Modern Orthodoxy, because of the different claims made to what Modern Orthodoxy looks like. Many ways of ‘being’ Modern Orthodox, as will be clear from the girls themselves later in this study, are far less religiously observant than Yehudia, and as such, the school may not want to associate with these versions of Modern Orthodoxy.
enclavist approach to Orthodoxy. The school day begins at 8:00 am with *shacharit* or morning prayers, and ends at 5:00 pm. The schedule has Judaic and general studies courses mixed throughout the school day.

**3.6: Participants**

As noted above, my study focused on the senior class, which had 23 students. Of these, 15 participated in my study. Each one of these students was formally interviewed using the interview protocol (see Appendix A), and participated in a discussion about the particular selection of Talmud noted above. Beyond these students, I interviewed an administrator, 4 Jewish studies teachers (out of 6), and the guidance counselor, using the interview protocol I developed. Rabbi Shemesh was one of the Jewish studies teachers, and we spoke on many occasions, during which times I included questions from the interview protocol. This was because he did not want to be recorded, although I did have his written consent to take notes on our conversations and my classroom observations.

I observed over 40 classes during my time at Yehudia, including English, history, Bible, *halacha* (Jewish law), Jewish history, two levels of Talmud taught by different teachers, and Jewish philosophy. Two classes (*halacha* and Jewish philosophy) were attended by the whole twelfth grade. Otherwise, classes were divided into smaller groups by academic level, according to the level of Hebrew language used in the class. Because of these divisions, classes ranged anywhere from 4 to 16 students. I was not allowed to audiotape any of the classes, but took copious notes.

My entry point to the girls at school was the Jewish Philosophy class. This was a convenient starting point because it included the whole twelfth grade, and because its
teacher is a friend of mine and was willing to let me sit in. At our first meeting in early December we sat in a circle. I introduced myself, and asked all the students to introduce themselves. I explained to the girls why I was in the school, and that I had the support of the administration to be present. I told them that I wanted better understand what it meant for them to be Modern Orthodox, and to better understand what they were learning at school that was committed to a Modern Orthodox education. I also explained that I while I had worked at the boys’ school, I wanted to better understand what girls learned and what their educational experience was like. I finally explained the consent process, and asked them or their parents to be in touch if they had any concerns. As some students were confused as to the purpose of my study, I spent some time over the next few weeks reiterating my intentions and goals for my time at Yehudia. Over this time, 15 girls and their guardians signed the consent forms. Additionally, 6 teachers and 3 administrators signed consent forms to participate in my research.

I ended up spending very little time in that Jewish Philosophy class, as it met infrequently. I spent more of my classroom observation time in two other classes: Rabbi Shemesh’s Talmud class, and Ms. Basser’s Jewish history class. I collected work samples from all of the classes I observed, as well as school promotional materials, schedules, the mission statement, and other materials of daily school life.

3.7: Data Collection

My data collection procedures included interviews, classroom observations, informal conversation with students, observation of school events, and examination of school documents. As noted above, I interviewed 15 students and 6 faculty members
using the interview protocol in Appendix A, and observed over 40 classes, mostly in Judaic studies but also some general studies classes. I set up an observation template that included details about the class and my notes, as well as questions that emerged for me to follow up on with the teacher, and ideas that occurred to me as I observed the class.

I also observed school events like an Israel advocacy program, holiday programming, *chesed*\(^{10}\) programs, a series of school-wide final presentations for charity advocacy, the end of the year tea, and the transfer of committee leadership at the end of the year, amongst others. I spent time in what was formerly the library (and still called so, even as it no longer contains any books) where students can do work between periods, the teacher staff room, and the Beit Midrash (where students would work, learn Jewish texts together, or just hang out). Between December and the beginning of June, I spent about three days per week at school, at times more and at times fewer.

The teachers’ room was a useful space, as it allowed me to speak informally with the teachers, and became a place where they would ask me about my observations and I would share the ideas that had begun to emerge or questions with which I was struggling. I had a notebook to keep track of my observations, reflections and emerging questions. My notes from classroom observations, which were not audiotaped, were written on a laptop computer. All of the interviews were transcribed.

Using an inductive approach that began during my field observation and continued as I listened to and transcribed the interviews, I began to note themes and categories that emerged. Using these observations I created a coding scheme. I coded the interviews, classroom observation notes and field notes using NVivo10.

\(^{10}\) Lit. ‘acts of kindness,’ such as organizing programs in school and in the community, e.g. workshops with the developmentally disabled or poor.
3.8: Positioning of the researcher

Ayala Fader (2007), reflecting on being a secular Jewish anthropologist studying Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, notes that, “Perhaps one reason that much of Jewish ethnography, and Jewish studies, has been apolitical and marginalized is that the question of allegiance persists. A first step to going beyond such concerns is to theorize a researcher's multiple positioning and history” (p. 131). She adds that, “For me, becoming an anthropologist through the ritual of fieldwork required that I approach my moral and religious struggles simply as data, part of the epistemology of ethnography” (p. 112). It is with this need in mind that I discuss my own positioning at Yehudia. As someone who lives within the Modern Orthodox community and feels personal concern for its well-being, I see my work in the light that Fader describes.

At the research site, I occupied two roles that need to be surfaced: male, and Rabbinic figure. When I first met the grade twelve class, I introduced myself by name alone, as ‘Rafi Cashman’, a doctoral researcher. I did this following Fontana and Frey’s guidance, identifying myself as a researcher who wants to learn from their environment and lives (Fontana & Frey, 1994). While I did not know any of the girls personally, I did know some of their siblings, and so eventually they found out that I was a rabbi. In order to avoid the distance I feared would result by my being identified as such, and insisting that in this space I was simply a curious observer, they respected my request not to be referred to as a rabbi. However, as they told me, they were still too uncomfortable to call me by my first name, and so behind my back they began to refer to me as “Dr. Thesis Guy” as a joke. One day, when I overheard them calling me this, we had a good laugh.
together at the revelation of their ‘secret’ name, and subsequently they began to simply refer to me in person as “Thesis Guy” or “Thesis.” While this could be seen as disrespectful (and it certainly was playful), calling me by my name may not have felt like an option for them, given my rabbinic status. This serendipitous turn of events allowed them to find a comfortable way to interact with me, one that was even affectionate, a comfort created on their own terms.

As a male in an all-girls religious environment, there were spaces, both physical and symbolic, that I was limited from entering. I could not go into the locker area where students kept their books and bags to observe the informal talk of that space; I could not comfortably enter their prayer space where they were not used to having men; I could not observe their ‘Family’ class, except when the content was considered neutral enough for my presence not to impede on their willingness to be open about things like sexuality and relationships. What I heard about these spaces came through what the girls themselves shared, as well as their teachers, and not through my observation of their experiences. While I had hoped to use the video project as one way to overcome the limitation of my access to certain spaces, it did not succeed, as I noted. As such, my being male remains one of the limitations in this study.

However, I want to note that while my spatial limitation was clear, what my being male meant in terms of what I had ‘access’ to was less clear. A small number of girls who appeared to be more comfortable speaking to rabbis in general were willing to be open and honest with me about their religious struggles. They noted this in our conversations, and I have reaffirmed it in personal communications with them in the years since the fieldwork. They continued to be in touch with me well after the end of my
time at Yehudia. I cannot help but wonder if they would have been as open with a female, non-Rabbinic researcher in the same way, owing to the different status of women in the religious community.

Finally, I would be described by most, and sometimes describe myself, as a Modern Orthodox Jew, by virtue of the synagogue I attend, the depth of my secular and religious education, my Zionist views, my daily dress, and my openness to Western thought and popular secular culture, amongst other social markers. As such, this project was personal as much as it was academic, even though this particular part of the Modern Orthodox community is not one I grew up in or feel particularly close to. My desire to make sense of my own religious existence was bound up in this project, particularly my interest in trying to understand the complexity of religious life in modernity, and my own struggle to make sense of traditional religious practice in a modern context, a relationship I often try to think through. My hope was that one result of describing this complexity, and viewing Modern Orthodoxy through the lens of culture instead of cognitively, would be to open up avenues to validate alternate modes of religious practice in Modern Orthodoxy, which is generally theorized and given validity in very narrow ways.

I also predicted that the tension for girls who feel the pull of autonomy on one side and experience patriarchy on the other would reveal more about the working of Modern Orthodoxy than a study of boys, who already benefit from privilege within their religious lives, and as such would have less incentive to rebel against its strictures. However, my personal interest in describing this tension extends farther than a desire to simply understand my subject matter or answer my research questions. It was out of a hope, similar to the one stated above, to give voice and hopefully validity to modes of
Modern Orthodox practice that were more open to the experience of women and issues of gender. Feminism, as Tova Hartman (2007) commented, has had a hard time making its way into Modern Orthodoxy, not necessarily because of its Orthodoxy but because of its modernity. Modernity’s demand for rational and ordered systems has limited the way people think about the relationship between modernity and Orthodoxy, and therefore the degree to which feminism concerns can penetrate Modern Orthodoxy’s practices. By using a post-structuralist lens, as well as ethnography as a methodological approach, I hoped to describe, give voice to, and possibly offer validity for practices of Modern Orthodoxy that exist in practice, even if they are challenging in theory.

3.9: Concluding remarks

Modern Orthodox education offers a unique opportunity to trace the discourses that arise when traditional knowledge and Western thought are present within one educational structure. Understanding the way in which girls go about this ameliorative or dissonant process is important, not only for girls’ education and religious identity development, but for the way it can help theorize feminism in contexts that also contain authoritarian elements. My research, like that of Jamal, Mahmood, Fader and El-Or, explores girls’ experiences of religion from their own perspective, without assuming false-consciousness or adherence to patriarchy. What I attempt in this study, and which has previously not been done in a Modern Orthodox context, is to examine the way an embrace of autonomy and its normative implications affect young Jewish Modern Orthodox women’s conceptions of their selves and their religious realities when this autonomy lives in tandem with the illiberal threads of traditional orthodoxy, as well as what sense these
women make of these contrasting discourses.
Chapter 4: Findings- Part One

Authority and Autonomy: Creative, Adaptive and Dissonant

4.1 A composite day at Yehudia

The schedule of a Yehudia day is quite similar to that of any other Modern Orthodox girls’ school. It begins with a school-wide required prayer service at 8:00 a.m., known as shacharit, and is followed by a dual curriculum of Jewish and general studies. Unlike some Modern Orthodox schools, which hold Jewish studies subjects in the morning in order to emphasize their priority, the Yehudia schedule mixes Jewish and general classes in such a way that they are evenly distributed throughout the day. According to the Rosh Yeshiva (lit. head of the yeshiva, i.e. headmaster) the structure of the schedule is not intended to make a point about the balance of Jewish and General studies, but is rather a practical choice around scheduling. To wit, the boys’ school holds Jewish studies in the morning and General Studies in the afternoon.

The district in which Yehudia is situated mandates the inclusion of particular general studies subjects for schools to be able to grant an accredited high school diploma. By their last year of high school students have fulfilled most of these requirements, so girls choose subjects that either meet their interests, generate an easy high mark for their GPA, or are requirements for entry into particular university programs. Most girls at Yehudia choose to take elective math and science courses, which are popularly seen as rigorous and serious. Humanities subjects like history and Jewish Studies are conversely known as ‘spew’ subjects, the term implying that these subjects are highly subjective, unchallenging, and of lower status that so called STEM (science, technology and math)
subjects. I had come across in my personal interaction with students from the boys’ school, and found that it cropped up often amongst the girls as well.

Rafi: What kind of things are higher achieving, or in general studies, like, you do science?

Rachel: In general studies science is huge. People see the histories and like the arts more as (pause)

Rafi: Spew?

Rachel: Yeah. (laugh)

Rafi: On the Jewish studies side is there an equivalent to science?

Rachel: Well, we all have to take the same classes. But I mean I’m in the high Ivrit (Hebrew language) class, but people still see that as spew.

Rafi: Are all the Kodesh\(^\text{11}\) subjects spew?

Rachel: Uhhh, ya. They’re seen as spew…

Jewish studies subjects, even those that are tracked at a high level, can still be categorized as ‘spew’ because of their overall lower status in the students’ perceptions. Tamar makes a similar observation, and begins to explain why there is a difference between the general and Jewish disciplines.

Rafi: Are the general studies subjects more serious?

\(^{11}\) Lit. holy. This refers to religious studies subjects in contrast to secular, general studies subjects.
Tamar: Oh, one hundred percent, one hundred percent (stronger tone), cause they are not a quarter of a (university) mark, they are the mark, pre-requisites. And the teachers are like, they have a curriculum, and they have to finish their curriculum.

And there’s a whole lot of knowledge and application.

Tamar accounts for the lower status of spew subjects in three ways: as having to do with the overall value of the mark (Jewish studies subjects at Yehudia collectively count as one mark for university admissions, while each General studies subject counts independently. This lowers the incentive for each Jewish studies subject), because their curricula tend to be less organized, and because of the lesser challenge of the subject matter. While the impact of this notion will not be explored here, it is important in understanding the overall lower value of Jewish studies subjects within the cultural context of Yehudia.

With just under one hundred girls in the entire high school in 2011-2012, and only twenty-three in the twelfth grade, classes are generally quite small, especially in some of the Judaic studies classes that stream according to Hebrew proficiency. One of the Jewish history classes had only four students, while the highest level Hebrew language class had eight students. Two classes, Jewish law (halacha) and Jewish philosophy were taught to the entire class of twenty-three girls. These were the only times that all the girls in the grade learned together in a formal setting for a Jewish studies subject.

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12 It is possible to understand this response as related to the observations made by Stodolsky (1993) and Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) about the higher status given to subjects that are sequential, where earlier parts of the course build on later part of the course, which is a common characteristic of math and science, but are not the case in the Jewish studies or humanities courses at Yehudia. It may also have to do with a high value placed on university and professional accomplishments.
The school strongly identifies as a religious-Zionist\textsuperscript{13} school. According to the Rosh Yeshiva, about 30% of the school’s graduates (girls and boys) moved to live in Israel (personal communication, April 23, 2012). While learning about Israel was not a significant part of the formal curriculum, it did come up in other contexts, mostly co- or extra-curricular. One day while I was at the school (December 9, 2011), an Israel advocacy group was running a program to help the girls explore their relationship with the State of Israel. On a semi-regular basis, the shlichim, or Israelis who come to teach in the school for three-year terms, did presentations on Israel, its culture and its religious significance (December 1 & 2, 2011 was one example I observed). Finally, days like Israel’s Independence and Memorial Days were celebrated by the school as a whole.

The only aspect of Yehudia that is not normative for all Orthodox girls schools, but is normative in the Modern Orthodox community, is that the girls had a Talmud class. The girls had Talmud three times per week, each session fifty-five minutes in length. The Talmud class tracked as the ‘highest’ focused on the skill of reading and interpreting the Talmud’s Aramaic, and was taught by the Rosh Yeshiva. In the other Talmud class, taught by Rabbi Shemesh, the teacher would choose selections from the Talmud that had Jewish values or halachic concepts he felt were relevant to the girls, which they would discuss together. In contrast, at the boys’ school most students had two to three periods of

\textsuperscript{13}While there is a larger discussion of how to define religious Zionism (see Finkelman (2005) as an example), for the present purposes, a glance at the school’s website will suffice (downloaded on August 6, 2014). The site says that one of its core values is, “To deepen and strengthen the centrality of Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael as a fundamental element of our Torah weltanschauung.” The use of the term Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel) refers to its religious centrality, while the term Medinat Yisrael (the state of Israel) refers to the government and state that is present day Israel. Both of these are, as far as the school is concerned, a “fundamental element of their Torah weltanschauung” or outlook. In this way, their religious practice includes not only the land, which is holy, but also the state, which is holy as well.
Talmud each day of the week, with the primary focus being the skill of learning legal
texts, with a heavy orientation toward legal theory rather than the practical application of
halacha. Historically, Talmud was something only men learned, and while Talmud study
has become increasingly common amongst Modern Orthodox girls in the last thirty years
(Gortesman and Sztokman, 2103), it was only added to the Yehudia curriculum in the last
ten years. One administrator indicated that this change was the result of pressure from an
influential parent, rather than a philosophical change in the administration. In interviews,
I found that the girls seem to be aware of, and confused by, the school’s ambivalent
attitude toward teaching them Talmud. I will explore their reactions in greater depth
below.

The class schedule is only a small part of what makes up the day at Yehudia.
Twelfth grade girls volunteer to lead in one of four areas: chesed (literally ‘acts of
kindness,’ such as organizing programs for working with the developmentally disabled or
the poor), choir, giving out lunches, and clubs. There is also a student council, which is
separate (as it is not limited to students in grade 12), and is voted on by the entire school
body. The leaders of these groups (with the exception of students council) are given their
authority in a ceremony that happens at the end of the previous year, where the positions
are ‘passed down’ to the next year’s class. I sat in on such a ceremony at the end of my
time in the school. Each new group was given a gift of some sort (candy, whistle, pencil
case, white board, lunch box) relevant to their new task, along with documentation of
what each group did during the previous year. This is one of the many ways in which
non-curricular events have become ritualized parts of the school experience.
School days are often interrupted by *shabbaton*\(^\text{14}\) preparation periods, guest speakers, holiday celebrations, Israel engagement seminars, Purim decorating, trips to volunteer in old age homes and with developmentally disabled individuals, lunch prep, choir practice and a myriad of other occurrences that make few days proceed according to the school calendar. Many Yehudia girls, in describing the school, see it primarily through this non-academic lens. It was not uncommon for me to hear the girls refer to school as ‘Camp Yehudia,’ or for classes to be half empty due to involvement in non-curricular activities. The active energy and leadership that is exercised through these experiences form a key part of what makes Yehudia different from its affiliated boys school. The meaning of this difference will be furthered explored below in the section on ‘Ruach’ and its centrality to the girls’ experience.

### 4.2: Learning to choose

With this broad description of the Yehudia experience in mind, in this chapter I will describe and try to better understand the notions of choice and autonomy, as well as how girls learn about and are taught these notions, owing to the fundamental role they play in their religious lives. This investigation will not only help make sense of the new and creative ways they adapt and change existing religious categories, but will also begin to help explain their continued adherence to traditional, authoritative and patriarchal religious practices, and why there was far less dissonance in these latter areas than I had expected upon my entrance to Yehudia.

\(^{14}\) From the word Shabbat, this is when students and staff gather together for an entire Shabbat together, often away from home at a hotel or in another city. This is run almost entirely by the student council, and is a central part of the girls’ experience.
The awareness of choice is a central feature of modern society. Choice in this sense is not merely that there are choices or options (which may also be a modern experience, as Berger (1979) notes), but rather the more radical sense that a person has the capacity to choose one’s own path more broadly, be it religious or otherwise.

Drawing on Berger, Charles Liebman (1983), one of the premier observers of 20th century Orthodoxy, notes that, “the claim that acting from conviction affords one the right to dictate the nature of one’s spiritual life evokes Peter Berger’s definition of modern consciousness as ‘the movement from fate to choice’ (Berger, 1979:11)” (p. 81).

Choice, however, is not the same as autonomy. Ayala Fader (2009) speaks about the Hasidic women in her study as utilizing their own sense of autonomy to submit to the tenets of an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish faith system, in contrast to an older, entirely authoritative model of Orthodoxy. In this case, a sense of autonomy is certainly manifest, as the individual is asked to exert an internal sense of will to achieve a religious ideal and is not simply expected to submit to it. However, autonomy is limited to this narrow frame, and it could not be said that the women feel they have a choice between different religious options (even within Judaism and its variants of Ultra-Orthodox).

In contrast, for the girls in Gonik’s (2003) study, autonomy is much more radical, with nothing being authoritative, thus leading to a much deeper and broader concept of their own range of choice. That girls at Yehudia should experience choice more broadly than the women in Fader’s study is not surprising, given that exposure to modern culture is not only a social norm in their community, but an underlying attitude of Modern Orthodoxy toward modern life. Yet what surprised me was the degree to which they
exhibited a sense of choice much more similar to the girls in Gonik’s study without it undermining their sense of religious commitment. I had expected, in line with Lehmann’s (2007) thoughts on the issue, that an increased sense of autonomy in religious life would ultimately lead one to deny religious authority, at least in some respects, or what I refer to earlier as dissonance. To my surprise, one of the first things I noticed at Yehudia was the lack of what, to me, resembled rebelliousness against the religious expectations of the normative Modern Orthodox community (with the one exception being how the girls dressed). This reaction in part arose in contrast to my past experience as a teacher in the boys’ school, where I perceived rebelliousness against religious norms as prevalent. For boys (based on my own personal experience and observations which are not part of this study), it manifested primarily as an unwillingness to participate in group prayer and a lack of desire to be involved in school-organized religious activities, which included the nature of their involvement in Torah classes. In contrast, I almost never heard girls ask questions in class that undermined the religious values or ideas being taught, nor did I see behavior around the school that could similarly be qualified as rebellion against the Modern Orthodox religious expectations of this community or dissonant with its norms. On the contrary, the girls were hyper-participatory in many ostensibly religious programs, and exhibited lots of enthusiasm for school-organized activities, religious in nature or not. In class, questions were primarily posed within the existing boundaries of the materials presented, and did not express skepticism about religious law (halacha) or religious ideology (hashkafa). Even some of the more challenging discussions, which will be explored below, could be aptly described as challenging from within the system than from without.
As I probed this observation with the girls themselves, what began to emerge was a deeper understanding of the school’s hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971; Smith, Bourne & McCoy, 1988), the implicit message that girls had the capacity for choice when it came to religious life; that despite the suggestion of Godly authority or expectation, that Judaism was not being chosen for them and rarely demanded of them, and that the freedom to rebel was distinctly gendered. Only when it came to the administration’s efforts to enforce religious rules that were part of the school’s policies, did girls push back or express negative sentiments. However, where there were no school expectations, girls were able to feel positive about compliance with religious rules. Thus, where the school made demands, they were rejected, not because of their religious content or religious authority, but because they were enforced by human authorities. It was not religious authority that was rejected, but what students’ viewed as the illegitimate expectations of the school when it came to religious issues. It would seem that only God, not school, could make demands of them and hold them accountable.

I further found it interesting that the girls’ sense of empowered choice did not seem to spill over into a choice to reject Judaism and its multifold expectations, but rather gave them space not to reject it. The absence of rebelliousness and dissonance in their relationship to traditional practice and expectations can be accounted for in part as emerging from an understanding of choice implicit in the school’s pedagogical approach. This approach, which will be described below, allowed the girls to exercise their own autonomy, and thus maintain a normative religious Modern Orthodox practice. The relatively small amount of religious expectations dictated by the school, therefore, allowed the girls to stay within a range of the school’s normative religious expectations.
In contrast, where the school did have explicit expectations, the students generally saw them in negative terms.

Before trying to formulate the way the girls expressed their understanding of halacha as a particular instantiation of their religious practice, I would like to step back and look more broadly at the ways in which the school ‘teaches’ them, implicitly most of the time, about this capacity to ‘choose’ in a religious context, and the girls understanding of and response to it.

Many girls see a relationship between the school’s general lack of religious expectations, and the lack of rebelliousness amongst girls at Yehudia. This implicit framing can be observed as part of the pedagogical approach and school culture. Tova very explicitly notes that “They (the school) tell us the actual halacha, but they would never tell us, you have to do this” (emphasis added) in their personal lives outside of school. Cindy similarly said, “in school…they teach you what you should do, but they’re not saying like, you have to do this” (emphasis added). Both girls are drawing attention to the distinction between teaching about religious behavior versus the explicit expectation that girls perform that behavior. This distinction is one of the factors that leads to choice about religion being an implicit part of the school’s cultural landscape.

While it is appropriate to assume that, as a Modern Orthodox school, there is a normative assumption that students are observant of halacha in general and broadly observe the most common religious practices like shabbat and kashrut, both Tova and Cindy are clearly under the impression that there are many things taught that they are not expected to do in their personal religious practice, as far as the school is concerned. The result, or implicit message, is that they are left to choose whether they are going to enact these
behaviors or not. As will become clear, this includes both areas of some conflict for girls, like how they dress, as well as the practice of specific laws, despite the overall acceptance of larger halachic categories. As an example, kashrut practice is assumed. However, as in one conversation that I was a part of, whether a girl eats a bagel at a restaurant not under Rabbinic supervision, a practice certainly unacceptable to the school, is an open question from these girls’ point of view, and they do not feel compelled to practice according to the schools’ specific dictates. This implicit message about choice may not have even been intentional, however, as Shira points out.

We’re taught everything. But we’re taught at an academic level, so, you have to keep the rules, and there are rules at the school, and you have to do well on your tests.

Notice the way Shira distinguishes between how they are taught the religious material “at an academic level” and the school’s rules about religious behavior. While students are “taught everything,” she says, both how they are taught and what they are expected to do distances them from performing religious behavior. When religious obligation coincides with school rules they cease to be religiously compelling, as will be discussed below. Further, the girls conveyed the sense that teaching religion academically makes it just like every other academic subject. Thus, religious studies, much like other studies, fall within the confines of the “grammar of schools” (Lynn-Sachs, 2011), which put a high premium on knowing content, but not on any specific behavioral or belief outcome. As Shira notes, school performance is approached from within a paradigm that lacks religious
expectations (i.e. they are ‘academic’), and instead expects that student will perform for marks and because they want to follow the rules. As such, she concluded by saying that “you have to do well on your tests”, an expression of the primacy of academic learning and the rules that are related to that learning.

Tova explained the notion of choice as explicitly part of the Yehudia value set, in contrast with how she viewed the other Orthodox girls high school in the city, Ma’ayan\textsuperscript{15}, which is to the religious right of Yehudia but still within their religious spectrum of accessibility. The result of the perception of choice is the presence or absence of rebellion.

Rafi 

Do you think girls here (at Yehudia) feel like they have more choice?\textsuperscript{16}

Tova 

Yeah

Rafi 

Does the school make you feel that? Where does that feeling come from?

Tova 

I think the feeling comes from a lot that our classes don't teach us hashkafa,\textsuperscript{17} which I know we talked about before, but there’s no teacher standing up there and like, being like, you have to do this, or you can’t

\textsuperscript{15} This is a pseudonym.
\textsuperscript{16} This part of the conversation was in contrast to Ma’ayan girls
\textsuperscript{17} Gortesman & Sztokman (2013) define this term as: “literally, ‘outlook’, a catchphrase for location on the spectrum of perceived religiousness” (p. 92), but relates to the group’s particular religious philosophy. Their definition includes its cultural implications and distinctions, which are not particularly relevant to this study. What is more relevant here is the presence of absence of hashkafa as part of what the school teaches its girls. This itself may be seen as occurring on a spectrum, from Modern Orthodox, who do not always provide a coherent hashkafa, to the less modern and more parochial, who are more likely to teach a more coherent religious worldview.
do that.

Rafi  What do they tell you?

Tova  They tell us the actual halacha, but they would never tell us, you have to do this. In Ma’ayan if you were wearing pants in the street you’d be kicked out. I just also think it’s the families who send to Yehudia that are like that.

The use of the word hashkafa here implies a larger conceptual or ideological Torah framework, or more literally, ‘how to see things’ from a Torah point of view. For Tova, not teaching hashkafa at Yehudia implies a lack of explicit expectation on the part of teachers about what student can and cannot do. She is saying that there is no larger set of religious expectations or value sets presented to the student, but only specific behavioral expectations. Absent from this larger framework about values or an expected religious outlook, girls are only told what is and is not permitted, without the larger religious framework (i.e. hashkafa) to motivate or guide them. For Tova, only when the actions are framed by a compelling religious rationale are they experienced as obligatory. At Yehudia, where little of this is provided, there is not the same experience of feeling compelled, and so Tova infers an increased possibility of choice.

Further, by not censuring the girls’ who do not comply with halacha or being explicit about their demand for religious ritual performance, the school sends a message about what its ultimate religious expectations are. This absence is part of the school’s hidden curriculum. As Gorsetman and Sztokman note:
Education happens all the time; it is not merely the formal school curriculum that fills tests and for which grades are given. People, especially young people, receive messages constantly, sometimes in subtle and unintended ways. (2013, p.3)

In not sensing explicit requirements for religious obedience, Tova learns that religious practice is a choice for her to make on her own.

Cindy also reiterated this notion in my conversation with her, whereby specifically drawing attention to when the girls are told what to do, she further elucidates the school’s limited demands.

Rafi Are there any expectations of the school?

Cindy I feel like sometimes out of school and stuff like they expect us, there’s a pressure of them expecting us to do some things, and they say, oh you represent out of school, blah blah blah, but like, but in school, no, they teach you what you should do, but they’re not saying like you have to do this. Like, no one’s ever told me I need to do this, except where it comes to tzniut, they don’t tell me I have to do anything. They tell me a religious school girl should do this, but they’ve never said, oh, you have to do this outside of school wear skirts. (Emphasis added)

As Cindy explains, the school’s performative expectations are rationalized in her eyes less by religious value than public perception. Moreover, the school’s overtly religious expectation for a girl to wear a skirt and be modest (tzanuah or tzniut in Hebrew) is not an all-encompassing expectation, but one limited to the school environment. This is in contrast to Ma’ayan, as Tova noted above, where this behavior expectation is enforced
both in and out of school. For Cindy, this contextualizes the expectation at Yehudia as demanding because it is primarily a school rule, even as it may be a religious one, while at Ma’ayan it is an overall expectation, not limited by the school or its rules. Yehudia students are never told to wear skirts outside of school, as Cindy notes, “they’re not saying like you have to do this”. The school makes very few demands of the girls’ religious behaviors, and from Cindy’s point of view, none aside from tzniut. This reinforces the perception that religious expectations are perceived as being school rules rather than universal and authoritative demands.

Cindy goes on to make another interesting distinction in the way she understands the school’s primary overt religious expectation: wearing a skirt. In the last line she says, “They tell me a religious school girl should do this, but they’ve never said, oh, you have to do this outside of school wear skirts.” First, the school posits wearing a skirt as something a religious schoolgirl should do, so it is clearly a religious activity, and not simply a school rule, when it is demanded of the girls. Yet, even this rule, which is the only one Cindy sees as demanded of her, is only the case within school. Outside of school, it is not an expectation the school has of her as a religiously observant girl. For Cindy, this contextualizes the expectation of wearing skirts as demanding because it is primarily a school rule, and not an overall religious value, or it would be demanded outside of school as well, as implied in the previous excerpt from Tova. She notes the rationale for this at the outset, when she says that the school’s expectation for girls to dress modestly outside the school is because of public perception (“oh you represent out of school, blah blah blah”), but not because it is a binding religious precept. Of course, the reason the school has this expectation in the first place is because of halachic
expectations around girls’ dress, but the reason they give to the girls themselves is not religious in nature but social, and it is this message that she learns as primary. Without the overall and totalizing religious expectation, and instead one that is only partial and socially justified, a space for choice and the exercise of autonomy becomes opened.

The distinction between in-school and out-of-school expectations, and the capacity to exercise autonomy, became pointed when the girls contrasted their experience with the other all-Orthodox girls high school where there are Modern Orthodox affiliated girls, Ma’ayan. At Ma’ayan, the Yehudia girls explained to me, choice is not equally present as at their own school. This is because of the expectations placed upon Ma’ayan girls by their school. Tova drew attention to this above when, in response to my question about what Yehudia’s expectations are, she said: “They tell us the actual halacha, but they would never tell us, you have to do this. In Ma’ayan if you were wearing pants in the street you’d be kicked out.” She adds: “Because a lot of them are forced into it. And a lot of them want choice, and in order for them to get choice they feel like they have to go to the extreme.” Choice is something Ma’ayan girls want, and something that is hard for them to get. From Tova’s perspective, they need to make extreme or rebellious decisions if they want to “get choice.” In contrast, because Yehudia girls do not have to “get choice” but rather feel they have it, learned in part from the school’s lack of expectation around religious performance, they do not have to act in an extreme way or rebel against their Modern Orthodox norms.

Malka makes a similar observation in her distinction between Yehudia and Ma’ayan, but draws a slightly different, albeit related, conclusion.
Rafi: What's an ideal religious Yehudia girl, what are the religious expectations or hopes?

Malka: Well, I don't think that the school really cares if girls wear pants outside of school. I think if they did then it would be more like Ma’ayan or something where they would like track you down and get you in trouble, so I don't think that they're really so against that…

By only enforcing modest dress (skirts primarily) in the context of school, Malka deduces that such dress is not really an overall religious priority, for if it was, it would be enforced outside of school as well, as it is at Ma’ayan. For Malka, the limited nature of the rule implies the absence of an explicit expectation. This distinction and its impact will be explained further in the next excerpt.

Rivki is also very explicit about the relationship between expectations and rebelliousness, as well as its relationship to in-school and out-of-school expectations. She similarly contrasts the Yehudia and Ma’ayan experience.

Rivki: And once you get to Ma’ayan, you’ll already, girls are like, I wouldn’t die there, I know it’s not crazy religious, but like, at the same time, Ma’ayan, they’re sort of known for their rebellious girls.

Rafi: What does that mean?

Rivki: As the more restrictions are put upon these girls, the more they want to break the rules. I know girls from there, and I know that like, they’ll say they’re going one place, and they’ll go somewhere else. Not even
anywhere bad, just somewhere they wouldn’t have, (she names a local pizza shop) for pizza with guys. It’s that sort of thing.

Rafi

So here you don’t feel like there’s a very strong sense of restriction here?

Rivki

I think there’s, sort of. I think personally there’s the right amount, I don’t ever feel there’s something I really can’t do that I want to do. The things I can’t do, I don’t have an interest in doing anyways, so it kind of doesn’t bother me.

Like Tova, Rivki’s example of a restriction is an out-of-school expectation made by the school, such as not being in a pizza shop with boys. This is in contrast with the Yehudia model, where the girls do not see any such expectations as existing outside of school. And like Malka, she sees a relationship between restriction and rebelliousness, something that happens at Ma’ayan, but not at Yehudia. And while Rivki notes that there are some expectations made of Yehudia girls, they do not encumber her or feel like restrictions. She understands that not everything is available to her, but at the same time, there is sufficient breadth that it does not encumber her capacity to choose when she wants to.

That Rivki both points to the need for autonomy as well as her comfort with her school’s normative religious authority is itself very revealing. It is not authority per se that is challenging, as the authorities she has in mind do not restrain what she might “want to do.” Rather, she exists within them in a comfortable way, and does not desire to go beyond their limitations, for they coincide with her own. This is not the same as what Mahmood (2005) found, that is that authority is understood as the structure within which
piety and other desirable religious practices can be actualized. Rivki here does not talk in
terms of the benefit of these authorities. Still, she is willing to let these authorities guide,
limit or restrict her, and as she experiences them as consonant with her own sense of self,
or placing such few restrictions on her as to not feel burdensome.

In our conversation, Tamar also made reference to the Ma’ayan girls, and I
probed about the distinctions she noticed between them and Yehudia girls.

Rafi You mentioned your Ma’ayan friends. How do you see Ma’ayan girls as
different from Yehudia?

Tamar I feel that they’re probably being told what to do more than they are
being told here. Even more so than here. And some will listen and some
will rebel.

Like Tova and Rivki, Tamar sees that the greater expectations made of Ma’ayan girls
(they are being “told what to do more than they are being told here”) leads to a greater
likelihood of rebellion, and that rebelliousness is directly related to the volume of
expectations made of them.

What is significant is not whether the Yehudia girls accurately describe the
Ma’ayan experience or not, rather that they perceive a significant difference between the
two school experiences. Ma’ayan exercises religious expectations not only to a more
significant degree, but more broadly within the students’ life, and forces girls (in the
minds of Yehudia girls) to push back. Yehudia does not create this level of expectation,
certainly outside the school, thus limiting any religious expectation to school and not
‘private’ life. This circumscribes the girls’ own religious experience on one hand, but prevents them from needing to push back against religious expectations on the other. The expectations that are made are, as Rivki describes them, normative and acceptable, at a place where the girls can both accept their authority without threat to their autonomy.

This theme came up one afternoon when I got into a conversation with two of my primary informants, Daniella and Samantha, and asked them about the lack of rebelliousness at Yehudia. They similarly went on to contrast Yehudia and Ma’ayan students.

Daniella  Less people are rebellious, I feel like, in Yehudia.
Samantha  There’s not a lot of rebellions here. Like, in Ma’ayan, if you go to Ma’ayan, and there’ll be like two groups, like the really religious side, that’s supposed to be Ma’ayan.
Daniella  Which is like a small group.
Samantha  And then there’s rebellious, right, and they’ll be like the ones who are worse than Yehudia girls.
Daniella  I feel like if you go to Yehudia it’s cause you wanna be here, you know what I’m saying, like, we choose to be here, so this is the type of person.

For Samantha, Ma’ayan is divided into two groups: those who are ‘supposed’ to be there, who are the ‘really religious side’, and those who are ‘rebellious’, and are ‘worse than Yehudia girls’, with the implication of ‘worse,’ meaning, at a minimum, less religious.
Daniella and Samantha go on to explain why this rebelliousness does not exist at Yehudia.

Daniella: It’s (Yehudia) smaller, so there’s less opportunity (laughing).

Samantha: I don’t know.

Daniella: A lot of people who go to Ma’ayan, their parents want them to be more religious than they actually are. Than the kids actually are.

Samantha: Then they rebel, then they end up at The Jewish Community High School. ¹⁸

Rafi: So you don’t think that kind of thing exists here, where the school has one expectation of religiosity, and you guys have a different one?

Samantha: Cause they don’t outside of school, we’re allowed to do whatever we want.

Daniella: Huh?

Samantha: Okay, about religiosity, we’re allowed to do whatever we want.

Rafi: Less pressure?

Samantha: Yeah, the school.

Daniella: They make rules, Ma’ayan makes rules.

Samantha: Other schools, if they see a girl outside of school, like like…

Daniella: Breaking shabbos.

¹⁸ This is a pseudonym for the local Jewish community non-Orthodox high school.
Rafi: What about in school? Is there ever pressure in school from teachers to be religious in a certain way?

Samantha: No, they don’t really talk to us about it, cause most girls that are here, they are religious. It’s not something that they focus on.

Samantha and Daniella pick up both threads discussed so far, and through this excerpt, one can see how choice and a lack of rebelliousness or dissonance are closely related in their minds to a lack of expectations on behalf of the school. The contrast they express is that girls at Ma’ayan, who are not allowed to do what they want outside school but always have religious expectations made of them, rebel as a result. Samantha first describes the distinction between in-school and out-of-school expectations from the school’s point of view, as well as the notion of choice implicit in the distinction. She says that, “outside of school, we’re allowed to do whatever we want,” which she clarifies by saying that this only applies to things religious. Since the school has no religious expectations outside of school, it must mean that Yehudia girls are allowed to choose to do whatever they want religiously when they are not in school, an ideal that has become clear throughout this chapter. This allegedly stands in contrast to the experience Ma’ayan girls. This distinction was conveyed explicitly by Rivki and Cindy, and implicitly by Tova.

Putting the two pieces of Samantha’s comments together, the following emerges: Where religious expectations are limited, girls implicitly learn that they have choice in their religious practice or observance, and the presence of choice relates to and is coextensive with an absence of rebelliousness against the norms of their community,
which are Modern Orthodox norms. The school thus keeps the girls within Modern Orthodox boundaries, less through the girls’ explicit buy-in or the school’s own explicit work, but more because the girls are not forced to choose not to be there (i.e. rebel against religious/authoritative expectations). Further, as seen primarily with Rivki, the normative authorities that do exist are not seen as grating or challenging to the girls’ own sense of choice or autonomy. Rather, they exist is a comfortable relationship to one another without threat or challenge.

For Samantha however, there is a different conclusion. In her concluding statement, she notes that the reason the teachers do not talk about religious expectations is because they presume that the girls act religiously outside of school. The implication for Samantha is that whatever choices students do make are religiously acceptable to the school, otherwise the school would have to make their expectations explicit. It would thus seem that whatever choices the girls make religiously, whether in school or out, are, as far as Samantha is concerned, religiously acceptable to the school. Were it otherwise, the school would have said so. What this implies to Samantha is that when she exercises choice, it is a normative religious value.

What can be seen from the discussion above is that the girls learn, through the school’s hidden curriculum, about the nature of choice in their religious lives, and they identify this with Modern Orthodox religious norms. This is seen both in the school’s decisions more broadly around how they teach and the lines they draw, and in contrast to what the girls see in their friends’ experiences at Ma’ayan. I will shortly explore how the perception of choice is further reinforced in the classroom itself, but first will look at the
way in which girls abide by rules and authoritative expectations as a function of gender, rather than simply out of religious obedience or educational experience.

4.3: *Reasons to choose*

In the previous section, I explored the way in which the hidden curriculum ‘teaches’ girls that they are in the position to choose whether or not they will act upon what is taught, which is to say, to choose the parameters of their religious practice. This happens within the school and through the manner in which they are taught. Also, unlike Ma’ayan, Yehudia has almost no out-of-school expectations for the girls, or at least one’s that are noted by the students. This reinforces the distinction between what the school teaches and its expectation of the girls, since if the school really had religious expectations they would, by definition, apply in and out of school. This distinction further deepens the sense of choice, since, when contrasted with Ma’ayan students and their rebelliousness, the girls of Yehudia understand that they have freedom that is denied to others. They thus learn about their own boundaries of choice through their perception of a contrast with others like them.

In this section I will explore how this understanding of choice is reinforced by teacher’s apologetic\(^{19}\) pedagogical approach to Jewish studies in the classroom, which, as we will see, implicitly teaches girls that religious decisions are theirs to make, furthering the sense that religious expectations are not being placed upon them. This will deepen an understanding of how girls’ sense of autonomy around religious things is developed, as well as some of the consequences that follow.

\(^{19}\) I am using the term ‘apologetic’ in the classic sense, of giving reasons or rationale.
Of the over-forty class sessions I attended, seventeen were halachic in orientation, and four hashkafic. In the halachic classes, and particularly Rabbi Shemesh’s class, the teachers overwhelmingly followed the description given by Tova, Cindy and Rivki above: Teachers presented religious information, but never demanded or even strongly encouraged students to follow. More specifically, the teacher would present an expected halachic behaviour, and then explain why that behavior was the right one, but did not voice a clear expectation that the girls’ should follow the rule. In this way, reasons often become the medium through which religious values and behaviors were taught. Rivki describes this approach as follows, speaking about a religious studies class:

…like of course we can have a discussion and contradict. Putting your opinion was always like a good thing… A lot of teachers they’ll sometimes just say, whatever, you have your opinion and I have mine, and like, that’s it, when they’re opinions… If we just simply said, like, one person said, I can’t think of anything, but everyone likes apples, and I actually don’t think that. I think everyone likes pears. They’re not going to be like, no, it says in the Torah, it says everyone likes apples. They won’t say that usually. They’ll bring proof, it’s like they’re showing us, they’re teaching us, they’re showing, well no, from here and here it says something like this, and then we can bring proof as to why we think that. And if we don’t have anything we’re going to kind of be stumped, and be like, I don't really agree with that, but I get it, and move on.

The teacher ‘shows’ or ‘proves’ to the student what is right, and it is up to the student to accept this or not, independent of the how ‘correct’ the proof is. There is not an appeal to a higher religious authority for the ‘correct’ answer, be it divine or Rabbinic, as seen in
Lehmann (2009), or as might be understood to be the case in a more parochial Orthodox context. It is interesting to note that for Rivki, being ‘stumped’ does not mean her being convinced about or accepting of an external, Divine or objective truth. Rather it implies that the decision to accept or reject a particular position is not about rationality, but more deeply, based upon personal decision making, for were it about rationality, her being ‘stumped’ should have forced her to make a decision in line with the teacher’s argument. This means that while ‘reason’ is the process through which the content is discussed, and reasons are given for each side to figure out what is right, the student can, at the end of the day, make a decision on entirely different, even personal grounds. As such, the decision to act upon what had been taught was ultimately an entitlement that lay in the student’s (autonomous) hands. For Rivki, a pedagogic approach based on apologetics, or reasons, reinforced her expectation that she was the one doing the choosing, to the extent that even a compelling rationale could be ignored. Reason itself thus loses its authoritative status as arbiter, and instead teaches students about the personal nature of decision-making. Thus, the original tool of reason that has devolved into personal choice is no longer about using reason as the basis upon which to choose one’s practice. Rather, it has prepared the groundwork for choosing altogether, regardless of what forms the basis of that choice – a very modern value. And this is perhaps what makes them spew – that they are merely personal and not, like math or science, factual.

After a class in which I observed this phenomenon, I approached Rabbi Shemesh to ask him about it, and he agreed that his approach was to present reasons for the Jewish laws he taught, and teach them in a way that did not impose expectations upon the girls. He explained that he did not feel that they were sufficiently committed to religious
authority to have these behaviors be expected of them, and creating expectations would only push them away from religious practice, much like the girls’ own description of the Ma’ayan girls. Instead, he provided reasons for the girls to commit to these behaviors, and hoped that the reasons themselves would sway the girls.

The approach Rabbi Shemesh takes is one that draws on a long history in the Jewish tradition referred to as *ta’amei ha’mitzvot* (literally, finding reasons for the commandments). It is based on a rationalist understanding of God’s commandments, that despite His transcendent knowledge, we are capable of understanding the reasons behind His commands. It is also seen as a tool for creating relevance in later generations of religious practitioners (Heinemann, 2008), and this is the approach that Rabbi Shemesh adopts in this class. By drawing on this tradition, Rabbi Shemesh is not simply choosing a pedagogical technique he thinks appropriate for his audience. He is drawing on an authentic educational tradition within the Jewish lexicon to help his audience come closer to the commandments he is advocating for.

While his approach evidences a clear understanding of his audience in one respect, its consequences for them were less clear. It would seem that this approach is part of a reinforcing feedback cycle, with the girls only being encouraged by him about what they already know – that they are the decision makers even in their religious life. This is because for these girls, unlike earlier Jewish theologians who employed the technique of *taamei hamitzvot*, rationality in post-modernity is suspect and biased. To provide a ‘reason’ is, therefore, not to provide objective grounds upon which to make a

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20 Although there are certainly references to the reasons for particular commandments in the Talmud, this approach burgeoned in the middle ages, most famously with the book *Sefer HaChinuch*, a book written from a father to his son, which details each of the 613 commandments in the Torah and a rationale for each.
decision, but rather to express one’s opinion. In turn, reasons reinforce the notion of choice, even as they provide the potential grounds upon which to make that choice.

I would like to explore an excerpt from my notes detailing one of these types of interactions in Rabbi Shemesh’s classes. The reader should know that it was not recorded verbatim. This is because while Rabbi Shemesh allowed me to sit in on his classes, he did not allow me to tape him at any time. The class was on women reading *Megilat Esther*, the book of Esther, a story of the Jews of Persia who are saved from the destructive decree of the evil Haman that is read during the holiday of Purim. Some background on the legal aspects of the issue is in order. For the most part, women are not obligated in a group of commandments that have time restrictions, for example, sitting in a *sukkah* (a temporary outdoor dwelling), as it is only obligatory during the eight days of Sukkot and as such, it is considered a time-bound commandment. Another example is the donning of phylacteries, which is only obligatory during the day but not at night. By all rights then, women should also not be obligated to read the *megilah* on Purim, as it only happens during the twenty-four hour period of the holiday, and is thus time-bound. This would be in contrast, say, to giving charity, which someone could do at any time, and is therefore not time-bound. However, for a variety of reasons discussed in the Talmud, women are obligated to hear the *megilah* read out loud. The topic led into a conversation in class about why women are not be obligated in time-bound commandments in general\(^\text{21}\). This prompted Tamar to say:

\[^{21}\text{There are different attempts to make sense of this distinction between men’s and women’s obligations. Some see the distinction as part of Judaism’s traditional patriarchy, such that those who advocate for equality today demand women be equal with respect to these commandments. Orthodox apologetics around this distinction comes in many forms, the most popular of which is noted by Tamar in the first line: that women are}\]
Girls are more *ruchniut* (spiritual) than boys.

Women have a greater sense of time flow than us because they menstruate, so they don’t need to have as strong a sense of time through *mitzvot*.

You can look at it that they are adding them for men to increase their awareness, not as a negative to women.

So women should be able to fulfill the *mitzvot* more!! So now it’s better for the entire congregation because they are used to the whole time thing. People who are very charitable still have the mitzvah to be charitable!

I don’t understand why time should be a reason?

A person’s ability to grow is based on: where was I the last time I experienced this? It’s a point of reflection.

But there’s always room to grow, so they should also be obligated.

You’re right. But it could be that if I take a mitzvah that has a potential to create a certain kind of awareness, women have that and the mitzvah takes you there. (Samantha expressed that she was not satisfied).

To be aware of time isn’t of itself a goal. Your growth is what you do with the awareness.

If you’re giving more opportunities to be aware, you’re given more inherently more spiritual than men, and as such, do not need as many commandments. Rabbi Shemesh will propose a different rationale for this distinction.
opportunities to grow.

Rabbi: There are other reasons [for the exception], like taking up women’s time.

Samantha: It takes up men’s time too. Is women’s time not worth it?

(Observation notes, February 27, 2012)

Rabbi Shemesh makes two attempts to rationalize women’s exclusion from time-bound commandments, both of which Samantha rebuts and refuses to accept. In the first, women are excluded because the whole purpose of time-bound mitzvot are to give people reflection points that will enable growth, but since women have this naturally, by virtue of their menstrual cycle, they do not need these mitzvot. Samantha cleverly inverts this argument, saying that if reflection points are useful, more such points will be more useful, so they should also have time-bound mitzvot. In seeing the power of her argument, Rabbi Shemesh tries a different approach. In the second attempt R. Shemesh provides another reason - that observing too many of these mitzvot will take up women’s time. Samantha again undermines his attempt, by questioning the assumption that women’s time is less valuable than men’s, since the equal value of men’s and women’s time in her world is taken for granted.

This interaction represents a paradigmatic attempt to provide reasons and a rationale for girls to understand and as such, help them buy into their tradition. The irony is that Samantha uses the very same rationality to reject the apology as originally constructed. What is more interesting is that she does so in a case where what was being explained was an attempt to demonstrate that the Torah doesn’t demean women by
excluding them from certain mitzvot. Samantha’s deep connection to egalitarianism, a
very modern value leads her to reject Rabbi Shemesh’s argument that would have put her
own discomfort with the tradition at ease. Thus, the very kind of logical analysis that
Rabbi Shemesh tries to use to reconnect Samantha to tradition is used to undermine that
very connection.

This case of Rabbi Shemesh also stands in stark contrast to Safer’s (2003)
observations of an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish classroom. In her study, expressions of logical
critique of religious ideas in the classroom were seen as resistance, not as potential entry
points to religious practice. Although questions were encouraged, they were low-level
and technical, not challenging like Samantha’s. Not challenging the teacher’s knowledge
became a boundary girls learned to accept, and the teacher’s responses to challenging
questions socialized them toward a certain way of learning texts. Rabbi Shemesh’s approach
also socialized the girls to a particular albeit very different approach to Talmudic text. Here,
there is not an appeal to the authority of tradition, but the authority of reason. This marks the
discourse, particularly in contrast to Safer’s ultra-Orthodox classroom, as prototypically
‘modern.’

What Shemesh further accomplishes can also be traced in contrast to Safer. There,
she makes the point that having access to foundational texts is insufficient to guarantee girls
a place in the interpretative process. Rather, the culture created around learning those texts
needs to be addressed as well. Rabbi Shemesh clearly does create an alternative learning
culture that places the girls within the interpretative tradition, even as the result does not
guarantee their willingness to submit themselves to its authority.
In another example, when talking about women’s modesty, Rabbi Shemesh explained:

I didn’t tell you that you should dress *tzanua* (modestly) because God says so, but so that guys don’t see you as an ‘it’. (Observation notes, February 13, 2012)

His language is revealing for the authority it draws upon. Even though he could tell that the behaviors the Torah proscribes are simply God’s infallible will, he does not, and instead tries to appeal to their rationality, thus drawing on a normative discourse of choice and autonomy within their cultural space. It is not God’s command, but their own rational desire for self-worth that should compel them to dress appropriately. He intentionally moves away from the authority of God or tradition, and instead to rational choice.

It is also interesting that he instead of appealing to God, he appeals to a form of feminism – that these young women should not be treated as objects of the male desire. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) comments that the women she studied used the modesty of traditional religion as a counter-cultural tool to protect and value themselves, even as it meant having to live behind a veil and more clothing. However, at least as far as I could tell, it was only Rabbi Shemesh making such an argument – not the girls themselves. As will be described later in section 4.7, it would seem that the girls were not conscious of or did not experience this form of the male desire, leaving such an argument to have fallen on deaf ears.

It should be made clear though, that while Rabbi Shemesh provided reasons for *halachic* behavior, her never intimated that those behaviors were optional. In one class conversation about abortion, he said:
You can’t go ahead and make your own choices, you have to talk to a Rabbi or a doctor who really know what they are talking about. (Observation notes, December 2, 2011)

This statement shows that Rabbi Shemesh did not mean to mislead the girls into thinking that they themselves are the ultimate authorities on halacha. However, he also understood, as can also be seen in the excerpts above, that the girls needed to be convinced to act, and making demands of them without providing a rationale would not only be fruitless, but counterproductive.

In the following example, one sees the two tendencies mixing together when discussing rules about purity:

The rule applies to you even if you think you’re the exception. You follow it because chazal (the Rabbis of the Talmud) said so in light of normative human nature. (Observation notes, February 7, 2011)

The rules are authoritative because they are reasonable. They are based on the Rabbis’ observations about the norms of human nature, with these observations forming the substrate or rationale for their legal creation, and are authoritative whether the reasons apply to a single individual or not. For the girls, however, once the breach has been created through the expectation of reasonability, it is difficult to place the authority behind the rule back within the confines of tradition. Rabbi Shemesh’s approach to this problem was to win his students over with reasons. The consequence of this approach was, however, the ‘hidden’ message it sent the girls. By providing girls with reasons they could accept or reject, Rabbi Shemesh was implying that the decision was in their hands as rational beings, thus confirming their role as religious arbiters. The pedagogical
method designed to help them accept religious authority, replicated and reinforced the
very assumption that drove it, which is their sense of choice, thus keeping religion in the
realm of choice, and not necessarily instantiating the teacher’s (or the tradition’s) reasons
as compelling. In viewing his explicit expectations in contrast with the implicit lesson,
one sees that he does not appreciate the contradictory messages being sent.

An example of the empowerment girls assumed through the giving of reasons, yet
the divorce from reasons as something compelling, is seen in the following example. R.
Shemesh’s class was learning about the mitzvah (commandment) to live in the land of
Israel. They were told about a 5th century Rabbi in the Talmud named Rava, who said
that if the Jewish people had gone to Israel in his time (and left Babylon, present day
Iraq, where most Jews were living in the 5th century) that such a person would be
violating a positive (active) commandment. Rava’s statement is based on a tradition that
once the Jews were exiled, they would not be allowed to return to the land of Israel until
God brought them back Himself. The girls, raised in a religious Zionist tradition that sees
living in the land and state of Israel as a primary and unquestionable religious value, had
never heard of this before, and found it challenging.

Tova What? (With distaste).
Rabbi This galut (exile, based on a verse in Jeremiah) is the model for
all other galuyot (exiles).
Daniella I don’t buy it.
Rabbi Why? You have to have a reason.
Daniella I just don’t. Why should this be a model?
Rabbi Shemesh both supplies reasons, and demands them of the girls when presenting the material. For him, every opinion must have a reason, even if it is not the opinion a person accepts. For Daniella however, reasons are not necessary – she just doesn’t ‘buy it.’ Even when Rabbi Shemesh asks for a reason, she does not provide one, but she also does not back down. Like Tova, Daniella’s choice is personal, and that is sufficient for her. What is also implied by the rabbi is that were she to have a reason, there would be grounds to consider her position. This is much like Rivki, who was quoted earlier saying, “And if we don’t have anything (i.e. any response to the Rabbis argument) we’re going to kind of be stumped, and be like, I don't really agree with that, but I get it, and move on.”

Reasoning is ultimately understood by the girls as a process that implies that they have free choice in religion, since each person can come up with reasons, but not as something necessary for making a decision – that is something that falls within the realm of personal opinion. While I am not making a claim that girls learn about choice only from school, as it is a normatively modern value, it does appear that at Yehudia they learn about, or are at least reinforced in thinking, that they possess choice as a feature of their religious lives.

In summary, the girls at Yehudia perceive a lack of religious expectations coming from the school, leaving them with the implicit understanding that certain religious practices are up to them to observe or not (except those that are normative practices in the Modern Orthodox community). This is reinforced by an apologetic pedagogical approach that, through a reliance on reason to support halachic claims, teaches the girls that reason
is a primary authority in the decision making process, reinforces the sense that religious

demands are not being made of them, but exist at their ‘reasonable’ discretion (a
discretion that seems in some cases to have devolved from involving reason to mere
personal opinion). One result of this sense of autonomy and the girls own authority in
religious decision-making is a lack of religious dissonance amongst Yehudia students,
which they perceive as in contrast with their friends rebelliousness at the more
authoritarian school Ma’ayan. As I will explore in the next section, this autonomy also
becomes evident in the way halachic decisions are made by the girls themselves.

4.4: *Halachic Contingency*

*Introduction*

There is evidence from numerous studies that, in the United States, individuals
increasingly arrive at their own religious beliefs. One of the ways in which Modern
Orthodox American Jews manifest their modernity is in the realm of self-
determination, especially vis-à-vis religious beliefs, and this has had consequences
for the nature of rabbinic authority in the Modern Orthodox community. (Waxman,
2004, 11)

The girls of Yehudia expressed their perceptions of different authorial entities in
operation in Judaism, each with different levels of value. One interesting paradox that
emerged in my interviews with the girls is that while Rabbinic law as a whole was
accepted as a non-optional legal system, each individual law was seen as subject to
individual choice, subjective in content, and historically situated. This limitation in the
application of *halacha*’s authority made it more malleable, and allowed it to be subject to
each person’s autonomous decision-making. This gave girls the flexibility and space to
exercise autonomy within an authoritative religious framework, but without the need to
choose between religious authority and their own autonomy. What emerges is version of halachic Judaism that is a syncretic and creative act. This negotiation resembles what Currie (2007) describes in the youth culture she observed. She notes that, “while young people create distinctive cultures (or 'do' youth culture) through their everyday interactions, their cultural production is mediated by dominant meanings and value systems” (p. 380). In this case we observe an element of personal autonomy operating with the larger framework of mandated Jewish practice.

A surprising and fascinating tension emerged in the conversations I had with the girls around their implicit awareness of the contingency of halacha, arising from their awareness of its historical development. On one side, their understanding of halacha is situated within a larger acceptance of the authority of halacha in general, such that laws cannot be rejected out of hand because of personal preference. As Rivki noted in her interview, “Like, for me, halacha, it just, it is, so you work within halachic limits. I wouldn’t think to go beyond halacha because there’s a reason for it.” Yet on the other, students often saw the particulars of halacha as quite easily changeable and malleable. They expressed this for different reasons: because times change and old practices no longer apply; because halacha is an evolving entity; because halacha is multiplicitous in nature; or because they see the subjectivity of human reason in the halachic process. I will refer to this constellation of factors a ‘discourse of halachic contingency’. Here girls draw on the relativism of modernity, what Charles Taylor (1994) described as that feeling

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22 This is reminiscent of Blu Greenberg’s (1981) oft referenced remark, that where there is a Rabbinic will, there is a halachic way. Greenberg, an early and perhaps the best-known Modern Orthodox feminist, argued for ritual change in traditional Judaism, and believed the Rabbis, as evidenced through her historical analysis, were less constrained in making this change than they claimed to be. The girls seems to have absorbed this notion on a personal level.
that, “everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value” (p.14). The decisions of the girls of Yehudia are moderated by the overall authority of halacha, but guided by modern ideas about individualistic meaning production.

On one side this implies the authority of halacha, and its inherent malleability and capacity for choice amongst halachic options, on the other. This perception of choice within an authoritative framework gives girls tremendous latitude to bend and modify halacha, thus imbuing them with a sense of agency when within an authoritative system, specifically when they find aspects of that system challenging or oppressive. Yet at the same time, it allows them to retain halacha has an authoritative element in their lives, an authority they do not have to reject despite its obligations and expectations. In this way, as it applies to feminist concerns in traditional Judaism, the girls are challenging secular feminism’s construction of feminism, one that primarily defines agency as resistance and which demands the breakdown of norms and structures that are part of a patriarchal religious structure (Jamal, 2009). Instead, they enact a more subtle feminism, one that retains the superstructure of traditional Judaism, but within which they have reconstructed their own space.23

A similar phenomenon was observed in the girls’ approach to Biblical and Rabbinic texts. In my discussions with them, many girls turned to halacha and Biblical sources (which together form the foundational elements of Jewish life (Sagi, 2008)), to make sense of the moral issues in the Talmud. However, while these texts retain authority as a point of moral reference, aspects of their authority were subverted, questioned, or

23 Of course, it applies to their religious life in broader ways as well, as per the example of eating a bagel in a restaurant without Kosher supervision.
personalized, and as such, subsumed within the girl’s autonomous self-conception. How this referencing occurred, and what sources girls drew on to make their cases, reveals a great deal about the way they incorporate notions of autonomy and egalitarianism (another modern value) into a traditional framework, and will be explored later in this study.

I will also connect their sense of halachic choice to their broader assumption that was explored previously in sections 4.1 and 4.2. This larger sensation of choice correlates with a specific instantiation of choice in the halachic or legal realm of their religious framework. *Halacha*, traditionally understood as a binding system or set of religious behavioral principles, takes on new contours within the girls’ religious discourse when choice is given the pride of place as noted above. Below I will trace some of the ways in which this occurs, which will further substantiate and help explain my observation that the girls are able to adopt the authoritative structures of religious life, instead of rejecting its strictures. The result, as I have stated before, helps account for the lack of dissonance I thought I would find at Yehudia between the discourses of traditional Orthodoxy and modernity.

**4.5: Exploring the discourse of halachic contingency**

The following conversation is taken from one of my conversations about the Talmud excerpt referenced in the methodology section, about the wife of a leading Talmud scholar and judge who dresses up in order to ask her husband if she can sterilize herself. He says yes, and she takes a sterilizing potion. When he finds out (and it does not
seem from the language of the text that she told him), he does not censure her, but expresses regret that she would not be able to bear him more children.

I would like to first draw attention to the nature of one student’s critique, and then notice her mis-reading of the *gemara* and what this may imply. This excerpt from a student, Cindy, begins by analyzing Yehudit’s behavior, and then moving to R. Hiyya’s response.

Cindy: And she didn’t do it24 in a way that, like, he would think it doesn’t affect me, that he would give her the blind *halacha*, and not what… And his response at the end, is, if you told me, the answer would have been different.

Rafi: What does that tell you about *halacha* and this whole decision-making?

Cindy: It tells you that *halacha* does one thing but people do what they want, truly.

Rafi: Well, that’s one way. People do what they want.

Cindy: But people don’t always follow the *halacha*. And they’ll twist it to make it the way they want.

Rafi: What was she doing with the *halacha*?

Cindy: She found out the *halacha* to get what she wanted, but if he wanted, if he knew it was her, he would have said no, the *halacha* says you can’t, since he still wanted one more kid.

Rafi: Is his response that the *halacha* would have been different, or is his

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24 Present herself disguised to her husband
response that, I might have told you the same halacha, but this makes
me really sad?

Cindy  It makes me sad.

Cindy’s first observation is revealing when contrasted with later parts of the excerpt. The language of ‘blind halacha’ implies that halacha is a system that can, at least potentially, be applied impartially and without subjective bias. Rather, through their subjectivity, people can upset this objectivity. She notes this subjectivity by drawing attention to R. Hiyya’s final response, that, “if you told me, the answer would have been different,” by which she means halachically different, as is clear from the continuation of the conversation. In many Orthodox circles, halachic decision makers are depicted as being objective.²⁵

That perspective, characteristic of the halakhic world itself, rejects as almost abhorrent the idea that halakhic decisors, though male, are unable to rise above the fact of their maleness and resolve halakhic questions in an objective manner without favoring either men or women. Underlying the conservative viewpoint is the assumption that although the involvement of human decisors entails an amount of subjectivity in decision-making, the system itself is able to neutralize

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²⁵ Although this notion can be found in many places, Lawrence Kaplan brings a selection from Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, known popularly by the title of one of his books, the Chofetz Chaim. He was one of the late 19th and early 20th century’s more prominent halachic decisors, with his writing on the laws of daily life and holidays being accepted practice in almost all Ashkenazi (European, which include most American) Jewish communities. Rabbi Kagan writes in his commentary on the Torah: “…Daas Torah must be pure, without any interest or bias,” and goes on to explain that bias can prevent one from properly assessing “the heart of the matter” (Kaplan (1992) p.8).
that influence, by requiring that its practitioners do what is right and just. (Irshai 2012, p. 2)

Cindy, in one sense, has accepted the notion of blind *halacha*. Yet when I ask her what her observation means about the halachic system in terms of this story, she says that people *twist* the *halacha* to get what they want. She has less faith in the willingness of halachic decision makers to act with ‘blindness’ than those Irshai describes. Taking it a step further, Cindy says that “She (Yehudit) found out the *halacha* to get what she wanted, but if he wanted, if he knew it was her, he would have said no, the *halacha* says you can’t, since he still wanted one more kid.” While *halacha* in theory may be unbiased and begin for Cindy as a legal formalism26 (Irshai, 2012), people are able to impact the system to get what they want, implying a deep subjectivity within the system. Yet there is more than subjectivity in the process of *halacha*. Rather, there is a clear assumption about the presence of self-interest and its potential to manipulate legal decisions. In her interview, Cindy made this explicit when she said, when discussing women learning Talmud, “…at the end of the day you don’t have an answer. Oh, you could pick whichever one you want. Go by the Rabbi you want.” Even within a larger system of binding and obligatory *halacha*, an element of personal choice is preserved. Daniella offers a similar response in the group discussion, which also orients the Rabbi’s response around personal preference.

I don’t think it has to do anything about the mitzvah. I think it just has to do with like what she wanted and he wanted.

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26 Legal formalism understands the law as “an autonomous system of rules and norms” that the judge applies, “independent of values, goals or interpretive methods.” (Irshai, 2012, p.12)
For Daniella, like Cindy, the decision made in this situation is personal and subjective, even if it manifested in halachic and religious categories.

However for Cindy, it’s not just that people do things differently than what they believe or can rationalize, rather her conclusion is that they can and will actively twist halacha to get what they want. These are very different moves, one natural and not malicious, the other aggressive and manipulative. The first assumes people are self-oriented, that they ultimately pursue their own desires, but the latter suggests that people manipulate religious truths for their own ends. The first assumes a theoretical halachic blindness, and by implication, discovery of truth, but the latter undermines truth through its total subjectivity. Besides being a cynical opinion of the process of halachic interpretation, it presumes an increasingly significant degree of human impact on, not just involvement in and discovery of, a system of religious law (Sagi, 2008). This orientation toward subjectivity is by definition problematic for her and her view of halachic texts, and by implication religious life writ large.

Cindy’s last comment is also revealing by contrast, as she is willing to reconsider the nature of the critique in this passage. In the last line she admits that the critique of Yehudit is not a halachic one, but represents R. Hiyya’s emotional disappointment. Her turnaround implies a recognition that the Rabbi has more integrity that she was inclined to give him credit for, and was not really going to change the ruling because it hurt him. This is an integrity that she does not initially grant him (or Yehudit in her motivations), and does in the end only reluctantly, based on a general assumption about how humans act, and how religious leaders interpret halacha. She assumes that halacha can be treated like putty, which people can mold to their own desired ends, and assumes this so strongly
that she misses the conclusion of the story, where the Rabbi seems to implicitly accept
the misfortune of his ‘true’ halachic decision.

Several girls described this feature of choice in *halacha* in their interviews.
Tamar explained her role in this process.

Or like, the way they dress. Like, I wear pants because I thought about it and it
just made sense to me, and I feel like I’m still following the laws of *tzniut* that
work, and I feel that other people just wear mini-shorts and tank-tops just because
they can and nobody’s telling them not to. I don’t believe they thought about it.
About what they’re doing and why they’re doing it. Does that make sense?
Tamar sees her decision as embedded within a halachic framework, but is at the same
time, personal, based on how she ‘feels.’ She specifically contrasts the thoughtfulness of
her decision with others who behave differently, and, from her perspective, do so entirely
without thought. In more rigidly traditional Orthodox communities, this kind of
personalization is not normative, and *halacha* is framed as an obligation from without,
even if one can submit to it in a personal way, as Fader (2007) observes. For Tamar, this
is possible because she sees Judaism as pluralistic. That is, it yields a range of possible
meanings, in contrast to general studies, as she notes, “General studies is more about
facts. The war did happen.” Judaism is not about facts but about opinions, which are
inherently multiple, and this gives her the capacity to make her own decisions about what
is true.

Rivki also sees the multiplicity of possibilities of *halacha*, even as she sees each
halachic option within a larger, obligatory framework.
Rivki: I can’t speak for everyone. Like, for me, halacha, it just, it is, so you work within halachic limits. I wouldn’t think to go even beyond halacha because there’s a reason for it. There’s a reason for certain, a lot of what, I don't know if you’ve seen, a lot of it I feel especially with talking to my friends, is the fences around the Torah. Those are always constantly being questioned, always trying to be pushed. That’s a huge thing, I think, for us. I don’t know why, I can’t tell you why.

Rafi: Can you give me an example?

Rivki: The one that comes to mind is shomer negiah, like, the rules for why shomer negiah is there, people are constantly questioning it, saying, if I’m not like, I know 100% personally I won’t be there, it’s there for someone else, why should I not be allowed. Something like that. Let’s say, I know 100% that if I give a guy a high five, I’m not worried it’s going to end up to more than that. That’s the only thing that comes to mind, but it’s constantly, it’s always fences.

Rivki’s thinking around the prohibition to touch boys is revealing. In her understanding, since the rules in this situation are only meant for people who will, through their own weakness, come to behave in ways that are halachically forbidden, and she knows that this will not happen to her, she does not have to observe the rules (‘fences’) set in place.

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27 The notion of ‘fences around the Torah’ denotes Rabbinic prohibitions that were created in order to distance people from transgressing Biblical commandments. Because they are Rabbinic and protective, Rivki does not see them as intrinsically binding if she does not feel she needs them.

28 The halacha that men and women who are not married or immediate relatives are forbidden to touch.
by the Rabbis to prevent these kinds of forbidden behaviors. There is no rejection of Rabbinic wisdom writ large, but rather an understanding of it as situationally rather than universally binding, something that would not be present as normative in an Ultra-Orthodox community.

Esther spoke about people in the school community who do not “really keep Shabbos, they use their phone on Shabbos, they go to parties on Shabbos. A lot of my friends would eat at (a local coffee shop), they’d eat like bagels and stuff.” She is referring to the fact that eating in a restaurant that is not under Rabbinic supervision is taboo in the Orthodox community. She also added why they do not think it’s a problem:

They don’t think it’s an issue, because their families do it also, or because, what’s the problem with eating a bagel, or a salad at McDonalds, if it’s a salad and nothing else…. A lot of them do it because they honestly don’t care, or because their families do it, or because what’s the problem with a bagel or a salad.

When a behavior is common, Esther understands that people see it as religiously acceptable, even if they are aware that there are other standards or expectations. When she says, “what’s the problem,” (describing the point of view of those who are more halachically flexible, in contrast to herself) she means, “what’s the halachic problem with a bagel or a salad?” This is interesting because, unlike the first two reasons she gives for that behavior (family or not caring), here there is a halachic expectation that is accepted, but the particular application is rejected so as to allow the desired behavior. And yet, as the conversation continues, she’s less sure whether this is a religious standard, or based on something else.

Esther When I was in Florida I had to ask my friends if they were going to a
kosher restaurant, cause, like, all of the Boca kids eat dairy out non-kosher. They’ll eat pastas, pizzas, things like that. Not just like salad.

So, like, it really depends on where you live, and like, and you can walk in in like mini-shorts and people won’t be, like, you’re a Yehudia girl?

Like, people wouldn’t say that to them, it’s like, oh, okay, right. It also depends where you live for a lot of things.

Rivki Living – that does what?

Esther Different standards of the community.

Rivki Those standards are religious standards?

Esther I don't know if they’re religious standards, or like, ways of looking at things.

The sentiment here is that religious and cultural expectations of community are what make practices normative and acceptable, more than the independent authority of halachic texts or rabbinic decision makers. As such, aspects of halacha become ‘ways of looking at things,’ which implies a non-authoritative perspective on kashrut practice, which is a religious precept. Once again, the girls express an understanding of the practice of halacha as relative and not absolute, despite accepting the overall construct of halacha.

In my interview with Tova, the contingency of halacha manifested in a slightly different way.

Let’s say, to wear a skirt all the time, let’s just use that as an example. Do I still always wear a skirt? Yes, because that’s just what the community is. If I live somewhere else, and it wasn’t like in the community to do that, like it wasn’t the
expectations or whatever it is, the norms, then maybe I wouldn’t. Why do you think a lot of women cover their hair, let’s say. A lot of them do it because that’s the norm, or that’s in the community. A lot of women in Israel are now wearing thinner and thinner things. They’re wearing headbands and saying they’re covering their hair. Is that necessarily covering their hair?

Tova’s observation about different halachic practices implies that its expectations are malleable and plural, again owing differing communal cultural norms. As a result, these behaviors cannot be categorized as right and wrong, but as she notes, a ‘norm’.

Esther fleshes out how a particular practice can be relative, while the core is binding:

We still follow all the laws of the Torah, but we don’t add all those extra things like, if the Torah says to learn, it doesn’t say to learn and teach your son Torah 24/7. You don’t need to learn in kollel. You can learn your daf yomi a day, you can learn your shiur. I think that if it says to keep kosher, doesn’t mean you have to be chalav yisrael. I think that’s border, that’s extras. If it says to cover your hair, I don’t think it ever says to cover every piece of your hair, I think you can leave some down. If it says in the Torah, um, to be tznius, I don’t think it says in the Torah you must wear a skirt that covers your ankles and your collarbone. I don’t think it says that anywhere.

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29 A seminary for Orthodox married men.
30 A page of the Talmud is referred to as a ‘daf’, and those who learn one page a day refer to the popular practice as ‘daf yomi’.
31 A class about a Torah topic.
32 Milk that has been watched from when the cow is milked until it is packaged. This is seen by some as a stringency, and is not normative practice in the Modern Orthodox community.
Esther quite clearly sets up a core and periphery model of halacha, a model that helps us understand the positions outlined by the girls above about their relationship with halacha. There is, for these girls, a core set of Torah laws and expectations. These are binding and authoritative. Because the girls submit to and accept these expectations, they have no problem qualifying themselves as religious. Much of the practice of halacha, on the other hand, is Rabbinic, and contains multiple options for correct observance. There are several implications that flow from this understanding. Unlike the core, Rabbinic rules are felt to be: flexible (or for Cindy, can be twisted); are subject to choice; and are subject to one’s understanding of the world, which can be influenced by communal norms. This allows for a tremendous amount of plasticity within an authoritative religious system, with the capacity to see oneself as accepting religious authority even while not following many of the precepts which are normatively accepted in the Orthodox world.

I would like to move back to the Talmudic text and a different approach to objectivity and subjectivity in halacha. Leah takes the potential for objectivity in halacha in a very different direction than her peers. She says, “I mean, first of all, I don’t think it’s so right that she cheated him, but I guess, for her to get the honest answer, which is what she felt she had to do....”. She’s one of two (Sarah being the other, whose words I explore below) who read the wife’s behavior as a search for the greatest halachic truth, knowing that Yehudit’s husband could not give an honest halachic answer if he was asked by her face to face. Like Cindy (who was part of a different conversation), Sarah suggests that halachic objectivity is possible, even as it may be influenced by human subjectivity. Yet she reads Yehudit’s deception positively, as an attempt to
counterbalance the human role in the halachic process; not as an attempt to manipulate it, as other girls perceived, but as a way of achieving halachic truth. For Leah, any lack of truth due to human bias is accidental, and not malicious and intentional, as with Cindy. Even as both girls go in very different directions with their judgment of Yehudit, both assume the potential for an objective halachic truth free of human subjectivity, even though such a state is hard to achieve, and both understood subjectivity as deeply imbedded in the system, even as they follow this premise to opposing conclusions.

Drawing from a different kind of halachic experience, Ayala also raised the question of halacha’s contingency, but with very different implications for practice. I’m just stuck up on the fact of the relationships, and how he didn’t notice that it was her. Also, when someone comes to a Rabbi they have some kind of connection. Like, if you ask a Rabbi a question he’s not just going to say, here’s your answer, bye. He’ll talk to you for a bit. It’s just, I don’t understand if Yehudit comes to the Rabbi and he just doesn’t find a connection and says no. When practiced ‘objectively’ out of the context of human relationships, halacha, for Ayala, is distorted. Proper halacha does not exist in a vacuum or in abstraction (Irshai 2012), but is mediated through the relationship of the person asking the question and the sensitivity of the rabbi making the decision. It is a personal encounter and process.

Ayala’s formulation is the flip-side of Cindy’s. While for Cindy, the subjectivity of halacha makes it ‘twistable’ and therefore suspect, for Ayala, its subjectivity makes it quite personal, sensitive, and appropriate for each person – which is to say, individually oriented. Thus, the subjectivity and relative nature of halacha that these girls identify can move in either direction – towards greater truth or greater distortion, toward greater
sensitivity or greater twisting. The very individuality that Ayala sees as possible and desirable in this kind of halachic system is the very same quality that for Cindy makes it untenable.

Sarah takes a position similar to Ayala and says of Rabbi Hiyya’s regret: “If you’re going to make a decision like that, think of it as if your wife is not having children anymore. Think of it more in regular terms. Instead of making this woman just a, you know.” Sarah reads this case as a lesson against abstract, universalistic thinking in halachic, against the legal formalism that Irshai understands as normative in the Orthodox community. It is not like math, which can be applied the same way in all cases, but needs to answer to one’s subjective experience, and therefore needs real safeguards to prevent subjective tinkering. The irony lies, contrary to both Leah and Cindy, in Sarah’s demand for deep subjectivity and empathy as a prerequisite to reaching halachic truth.

These conversations reveal several noteworthy trends. Broadly, one observes an increasingly subjective, and therefore malleable understanding of halacha amongst the girls. This stands in stark contrast to the Ultra-Orthodox community’s movement to shore up the process of halacha (even if by all agreement it is a human endeavor) by endowing halachic decision makers with da’as Torah, or access to transcendent understanding in halachic decision making that is not based in codified text (Cohen, 1984; Irshai 2012; Kaplan, 1991; Salomon, 2012). The discourse of these girls thus manifests a determinately modern notion of religious law that, by recognizing the role of human subjectivity in its decisions normative and acceptable, challenges part of the religious truth of its claims. For these girls, this leads to a contingency of halacha, and therefore the capacity to reject parts of halachic life where they find dissonance. As can
be understood from Cindy and Leah, this does not mean that an ‘objective’ halacha is not possible. Human bias can be removed in theory, but one has to be very determined and exacting. They thus retain some notion of halacha as, at least potentially, transcendent and objective, even if in practice it might not always be so. Yet it is this very lack of necessary objectivity that is one of the elements that gives them the autonomy to reject halacha’s specific authoritative claims over them.

Further, in accepting the contingent nature of halacha, they become open to making claims of contemporary irrelevance. Sarah notes that “the halacha says you can hit your children, right, that’s what we’re learning, but nowadays it’s like not appropriate,” to which Cindy responded, “It’s a black and white thing that changes with the times.” The very notion of something being black and white implies that there is an objective truth, but that an understanding of historical change makes that truth irrelevant. Human decisions located in a historically developmental and subjective halachic system, even at their objective best, are still ultimately historically located, and therefore not necessarily applicable. Thus, even what is deemed ‘right’ or ‘truthful’ can be manipulated or even pushed aside as historically contingent. Rivki noted in an interview, when speaking about homosexuality, “I don’t think halacha really anticipated this when it, like, when it was put down, so this situation kind of spins it a little,” and later in the conversation when talking about the early medieval commentator, Rashi, “…like, I think Rashi was talking for his time, like, I don’t think they’d say Rashi was wrong, but like, yeah, like, times have changed and I think if Rashi lived here now, he might even have changed what he would have said himself.” This acceptance of the historical contingency of Jewish norms gives enormous autonomy to the individual to make sense of authoritative halachic
decisions. It allows the practitioner to accept past constructions as valid even as they do not accept their authority for contemporary practice.

Thus, the contingency of halacha as it is represented here, is part of what gives the girls the space needed to live within the overall authoritative system of Torah and halacha, and remain committed to a traditional Jewish life. It also gives them a sense that what does apply may be personally decided, and therefore neither authoritative or threatening to their individuality. Yet at the same time, it allows them to remain within a communal authoritative and traditional framework. A similar phenomenon was noted by El-Or (2002, p.90) in her study of a Modern Orthodox women’s seminary, situated in an Israeli university. She observed the way the girls on one hand conformed to a rigidly traditional social and communal code, but on the other hand, “insist on constructing an individual experience” out of the authoritative expectations they lived within. In the case of Yehudia, there was much more interpenetration between the religious expectations and individual constructions of halacha, however the parallel remains instructive. Similar to what El-Or observed, the Modern Orthodox educated women of Yehudia are pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable for women to do in religious life from within the system. Halacha as an authoritative superstructure is not seen as subjective, rather, room is made within the application of halacha, and through an alternate understanding of it, that allows the girls to retain its expectations in a way that is acceptable to them.

4.6: Textual-moral framework

Throughout the Talmud-study referenced above and discussed in more detail in the methodology section, the girls often turned towards halachic rationales, or Torah
passages, to judge and make sense of the morality of Yehudit’s (the wife) actions. In doing so, they indicated that they view religious texts as a primary reference point for moral decision-making.\textsuperscript{33} Mahmood (2005, p.15) explains, speaking in the Muslim Egyptian context, that, “the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted.” For the girls, a similar process is operating, except that it is the authoritative traditional text, not the past, that forms the ground for their constitution, and through this, its personalization. Here I am interested in the way that a discourse of autonomy permeates their comprehension of these authoritative texts, and how they use these texts to bolster their positions, instead of relying on ‘my opinion’ (i.e. their own opinions) as an acceptable basis for response.

Two biblical stories came up in two of the three focus groups, each used as way to decide if Yehudit’s dissembling was justified or not. In the first, students used the story of Judah and Tamar, and in the second, they made reference to Jacob and Esau. I will summarize both stories in brief as they arise. A Rabbinic story from about the second or third century (and discussed in another part of the Talmud) emerged as well, about Rabbi Akiva and his wife. Although this text was used for a different purpose, it exhibited the

\textsuperscript{33} One of the informants here, Ms. Basser, is a teacher. However, I have decided to include her contributions for two reasons. This teacher is quite young, at twenty-five, and is herself a Yehudia graduate, now in her third year as a teacher. She comes from the same community as the girls, and was the camp counselor to many of them before she started teaching them. Both she and many girls noted the low degree of formality and high degree of friendliness that exists between them, in contrast to other teachers, and I saw this often. I felt that she encompassed a similar discursive space to the students, specifically in terms of religious and cultural issues. As such, I have included an excerpt from her remarks during one of the conversations for their added value in making sense of how texts are used.
same trends I observed in the biblical texts, and so will be examined here. I will give the
details of that story later as well.

The thirty-eighth chapter of the book of Genesis tells the story of Judah (Yehudah in Hebrew), son of Jacob, and Tamar. Tamar was Judah’s daughter-in-law who first married Judah’s oldest son, and when he died, married the next son in line, who died as well. In both marriages she was childless. Following the biblical law of yibum (levirate marriage), Tamar was obliged to marry another of Judah’s sons. Judah did not want Tamar to marry another son, so he kept her at a distance. Tamar, upset by this, pretended to be a prostitute, slept with Judah (her identity unknown to him), and became pregnant. The Torah ultimately seems to vindicate her actions, thus implicitly accepting her duplicity.

In one conversation, the girls immediately gravitate to the Yehudah and Tamar story as a parallel to justify Yehudit’s deception of her husband.

Rafi     How does she (R. Hiyya’s wife) go about getting what she wants?
Cindy    She tricks him.
Rafi     In what way does she trick him?
Cindy    By disguising herself.
Sarah    Cutting her off from being pregnant.
Esther   And pretending she’s someone that she’s not.
Ayala    It’s Tamar and Yehudah.
Ayala moves from the moral problem in the story as developed by the girls in her class, to quickly identifying the parallel to it in the story of Yehudah and Tamar, which contains a comparable moral dilemma. This biblical paradigm is taken a step further in the next excerpt.

Each of the excerpts below exhibits a hybrid autonomy/authority discourse. As noted above, in Lehmann’s (2007, 2009) Modern Orthodox classroom, her English literature class exhibited a discourse of autonomy, marked by personalized language and personal expression, while her Bible class exhibited a discourse of authority, where personal opinion had no status, and value was found only in what had been said by Rabbinic or biblical predecessors. These trends were tracked in the language of the classroom, by drawing attention to the lack of personal talk, and an increased reliance on established authority for determining ‘correct’ answers. Lehmann (2009, p. 303) notes that, “These features include the dominance of the teacher’s voice, the weight of the interpretive tradition and the minimal role of the individual.”. In contrast, the two excerpts here do not follow this strict dichotomy, but exhibit something new and syncretic. The first come from Ms. Basser.

*I’m going back* to the Tamar and Yehudah story, which is different, but, *I think* in the Tamar and Yehudah story they don’t, she’s not a villain, *I mean*, Daveed *(King David)* comes from her. So if that’s ok, and she disguised and everything there, then *I’m thinking* what she did here is okay, unless the sterilization she did is a problem, then *I have a problem* with that. But *I don’t* have a problem, *I don’t* think *I have a problem* with what she did.
For Ms. Basser, if what Tamar did is acceptable, as evidenced by her progeny being King David (i.e. a meritorious outcome), then the outcome of what Yehudit did should be okay as well, as long as there was not a competing halachic prohibition. She says “I’m going back to the Tamar and Yehudah story” and “I think in the Tamar and Yehudah story…she’s not a villain, I mean, Daveed comes from her.” For Ms. Basser, if the actions of Tamar are acceptable, “then I’m thinking what she did here is okay”. The biblical case justifies her personal acceptance of Yehudit’s behavior. This is placed in contrast with the question of sterilization in the Talmudic case, which although not explicit, “is a problem” only if it is legally forbidden; in fact, if there is a halachic problem with sterilization, then Ms. Basser personally endorses that position, as she stipulates, “then I have a problem with that.” Ms. Basser invokes her personal feelings, and not just an abstract and demanding law that is the ground for the critique. This seems to be emphasized, and goes beyond the halachic or biblical when she concludes: “But I don’t have a problem, I don’t think I have a problem with what she did.” At this point, the decision comes solely from a personal place. One could not really call this moral decision-making autonomous, since the decisions comes as a result of turning to biblical and halachic precedent; at the same time, it is not just an appeal to authority either. Rather, Ms. Basser has blended the two, such that the decision making process is contextualized by her personal understanding of the law, and the conclusion seems, although derived from the biblical and halachic texts. It is a hybrid of the authoritative and the autonomous.

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Referring to King David
What one observes here, then, is a mingling of the discourses of authority and autonomy in a single space. The use of biblical texts as the reference point for judgment, while not entirely surprising given the educational context, is still noteworthy, since we have seen a reliance on ‘opinion’ as sufficient. More importantly however, this is a powerful example of syncretic work in action. Here, biblical texts, which are construed as authoritative, as subsumed into a personalized, autonomy-oriented discourse. The text does not stand on its own, nor is it, like in Lehmann’s school, an external authoritative document. Rather, it has been personalized and internalized.

The story of Isaac and Jacob (Yakov and Yitzchak in Hebrew) is also used as an intertextual reference point, within which the same hybrid discourse is found. In this biblical story, Jacob, encouraged by his mother, dresses up as his brother Esau in order to get the blessing of the first born from his father Isaac. While the commentators are mixed about the morality of his actions, there is a tendency to vindicate Jacob’s behavior and see his deception as ultimately justified. Like the previous story this one deals with the permissibility of deception, and the girls attempted to apply these cases to our text.

After asking a question about Yehudit’s change of appearance and what it means, Leah responded as follow:

Leah: It kind of reminds me when like with Yitzchak and Yakov and how they... so like we’re learning about that in chumash (the five books of Moses).

Rafi: That they were deceptive.
Leah  

*I mean, first of all, I don’t think it’s so right* that she (Yehudit) cheated him, but *I guess*, for her to get the honest answer, which is what she felt she had to do....

Leah turns to the story of Jacob and Isaac, like Ms. Basser did with the Yehudah and Tamar story, to figure out if deception can be acceptable. This is her first instinct. Yet immediately afterward she pulls back and says, “I don’t think it’s so right that she cheated him.” In doing this, she moves away from the biblical narrative as a reference point and toward her own moral compass - a personal, autonomous judgment of Yehudit’s behavior. Yet this move is itself questioned, as she sees the redeeming possibility in Yehudit hiding from her husband in order to ask a halachic question. To ‘get the honest answer’ functions similarly to Cindy’s notion of ‘blind halacha’ and the possibility of reaching an objective truth.

Leah’s response embodies, in this short interaction, many of the elements observed so far. Her first inclination is to turn to the textual tradition, either because it is proximate and contextual as a school activity and a pedagogical norm, or because it is part of how these girls come to make sense of a moral issue, as happened in each of the focus groups. But she also moves to acknowledge her own, more personal moral critique of Yehudit. Finally, representing her unique attempt to justify Yehudit’s behavior, she turns to the notion of halachic contingency that was identified in Cindy. She assumes that a halachic truth could be achieved, and reads Yehudit’s deception as an honest attempt to do this. Absent this deception, human subjectivity would have improperly influenced the halachic outcome.
In both Ms. Basser and Leah we see emerging discourse where religious authorities (*halacha* and the biblical narratives) are personalized, and thus subsumed within an autonomous framework. The texts are contextualized by personalization, even as their own, quite independent autonomous opinions also play a legitimate and deciding role in judging Yehudit’s behavior. While in a way, Ms. Basser and Leah have taken on the texts as their own, thus limiting the sense of imposed burden, I do not think this tells the whole story. They move too easily and smoothly between these personalized expressions of text and their own, quite independent and autonomous opinions, such that the two seem to have been melded or syncretized in some way. Their success seems to lie their having brought the mountain to Mohammad, more than the alternative. Mahmood notes the challenge of delineating the strictly personal from the authoritative.

How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and *where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality?*” (emphasis added, Mahmood, 2005, p. 31)

This personalization is possible because the texts themselves have become, as their language suggests, a personal expression; in a very personal sense, the girls have adopted the texts as authoritative. What they are doing is both syncretic and creative, having generated a relationship to authoritative texts that intensely personal, and yet can also act as an reference point of accountability, and as a lens to generate moral clarity.

Other biblical and Rabbinic sources that similarly mediate the relationship between autonomy and authority were referenced as the girls tried to understand the story. Bracha
wonders if Yehudit was wrong to remove from herself the fate of woman as described in
the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

So now I’m wondering if it was appropriate for her to do something like that. But at
the same time, like, the woman is the one who’s going through all the pain just so
the man gets a mitzvah. But like, at the same time that was our punishment from
Chava\textsuperscript{35}, Adam and Chava, from their thing, like, we had to have birth-pains. So I
don’t think we can take that away, and just not have children, cause like we’re not
going to fill the world. We just learned in \textit{Mishpacha}\textsuperscript{36} that Hashem (G-d) created a
world so it could be filled, and if we don’t have children, then we’re not...

Bracha’s first construction is local, and tries to work through the rationale for the mitzvah
of reproduction. Since the man is the only one who is commanded to reproduce, why
should women suffer? This is an objection on based personal moral grounds, not one
raised by the tradition, as an objection to \textit{halacha}. But as with Leah, this personal moral
awareness of injustice is weighed against the lesson she learns from the biblical narrative
of Adam and Even, where Eve’s punishment is her birth-pains. She follows this by a
more abstract, conceptual rationalization, that Jews are obligated to ‘fill the earth’, \textit{peru}
u’\textit{revu}, and that this is an obligation on all people, even if they have no halachic
obligation.

Similarly to the trends seen above, Bracha frames her analysis in personal terms
when she says, “So now \textit{I’m} wondering,” and “So \textit{I don’t think} we can take that away,”
where the first comment seems entirely personal and grounded in an autonomous

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{35} Chava is the Hebrew name for Eve
\textsuperscript{36} Lit. family. Here it refers to a class the girls have once a week about the family,
marriage, relationships, etc.}
morality, and the second is framed by her understanding of the biblical story of Eve. However, she does move to a more traditional, authoritative discursive stance, the kind to which Lehmann’s (2007) analysis of authoritative talk draws attention. In her concluding phrase she says, “and if we don’t have children, then we’re not…”. Here the ‘we’ are Jews in general, and their generalized set of obligations. The communal frame, however, seems to be the exception to the rest of her language use, rather than the rule of her discourse around text, thus being the exception to using the text as individual or self oriented.

Tamar’s response below constitutes another example of the use intertextual references to determine the morality of Yehudit’s actions, yet she turns to a Rabbinic story instead of a biblical one. She also exhibits a similar personalization of the text, but in a different manner. The story she draws on is that of one of the Talmud’s greatest sages, Rabbi Akiva.\[37\] Rabbi Akiva was a poor farmer, and yet, the daughter of a wealthy

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\[37\] Tractate Nedarim, 50a, Soncino translation: The daughter of Kalba Shebu'a (a wealthy man) betrothed herself to R. Akiba (a poor, uneducated shepherd). When her father heard thereof, he vowed that she was not to benefit from aught of his property. Then she went and married him in winter. They slept on straw, and he had to pick out the straw from his hair. 'If only I could afford it,' said he to her, 'I would present you with a golden Jerusalem.' [Later] Elijah came to them in the guise of a mortal, and cried out at the door. 'Give the same straw, for my wife is in confinement and I have nothing for her to lie on.' 'See!' R. Akiba observed to his wife, 'there is a man who lacks even straw.' [Subsequently] she counseled him, 'Go, and become a scholar.' So he left her, and spent twelve years [studying] under R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. At the end of this period, he was returning home, when from the back of the house he heard a wicked man jeering at his wife, 'Your father [should this be husband?] did well to you. Firstly, because he is your inferior; and secondly, he has abandoned you to living widowhood all these years.' She replied, 'Yet were he to hear my desires, he would be absent another twelve years. Seeing that she has thus given me permission,' he said, 'I will go back.' So he went back, and was absent for another twelve years, [at the end of which] he returned with twenty-four thousand disciples. Everyone flocked to welcome him, including her [his wife] too. But that wicked man said to her, 'And whither art thou going?' 'A righteous man knoweth the life of his beast,' she retorted. So she went to see him, but the disciples wished to repulse
man wanted to marry him despite her father’s threats to cut her off financially if she did. She married him nonetheless, living for many years in poverty while her husband, Rabbi Akiva, spent years away studying and growing into a Rabbinic leader. Both her willingness to give up wealth for this man, and live alone while he learned Torah, were seen by Tamar as acts of love.

Rivki I kind of agree with Tamar to an extent. Like what we said before, it was clearly a very dysfunctional relationship, and she (the wife) may have been scared to approach him (R. Hiyya), and that’s why she went to him in that way. But I don’t know if she thought it through because it really could have been just for herself and for her safety.

Samantha Maybe it’s dysfunctional nowadays, but back then they didn’t really marry for love.

Rivki You don’t know that! You don’t know whether they were in love or not.

Tamar Ok, there’s this story with Rabbi Akiva and he marries her for love and she stood up to her father and she went against him, so if you want power you can get it yourself.

Samantha Ok, fine, there’s the odd occasion where you marry for love and you get disowned. I’m saying nowadays they marry for love, but then they couldn’t.

her. 'Make way for her,' he told them, 'for my [learning] and yours are hers.' When Kalba Shebu'a heard thereof, he came [before R. Akiba] and asked for the remission of his vow and he annulled it for him. (Downloaded from http://www.come-and-hear.com/nedarim/nedarim_50.html on October 3, 2012)
Tamar uses the story of Rabbi Akiva’s wife, Rachel, to do two things. The first is to make a point about the possibility of marrying for love in ancient times. This reference legitimizes her contemporary normative expectation of relationships. Second, she uses this story to critique Yehudit’s behavior and her lack of willingness to confront her husband, and frames it in very contemporary terms; as a lack of exertion of agency, or as she calls it, power.

Tamar perceives in the story that, “if you want power you can get it yourself.” As with other girls, she uses an alternate textual reference to make a moral claim in this story about correct, or in this case, ideal behavior. Tamar uses the text to substantiate a contemporary claim about love and female power. Thus, an alternate narrative Rabbinic intertext forms the basis of her approach, but also leads her to make a comment about women’s power, which she sees Yehudit as not having exercised. Her support text, in contrast to the one we were studying, substantiates a woman’s right to act autonomously, no matter the historic circumstances. This notion of self-advocacy, which Tamar uses the story to support, is a modern concept, premised on an autonomous self. While one may argue about whether Rachel acted for love or had some other motivation, since it is not clear from the text what her motivations were, she does stand up to her father in order to
choose her husband, acting, for Tamar, as women should act. Tamar reads into Rachel’s proactive choice against her father and in favor of her desired husband the capacity to choose, for a woman to “take” power. She critiques the lack of self-actualization and self-empowerment in our story, qualities that are notably modern, and certainly so for a woman in a religious context.

For Tamar, when you exercise power, it should be like Rachel - you have to “get it yourself.” It is not a manipulative type of power, like the kind demonstrated by Yehudit. For Tamar, this sense of Yehudit is implied by her critique of what power should be. Even though Yehudit’s actions could be construed as taking power into her own hands, as a way of her exercising agency within a patriarchal system, this is not the kind of power Tamar respects. Yehudit moves around the system to get what she needs. She employs a deceptive kind of power borne of necessity and limitation. Tamar sees herself as either sufficiently confident in her own power to get what she needs or wants, or does not see the limitations that Yehudit saw as intrinsic or endemic to the system of norms which they both participate in, such that her response could be seen as justified.

As a final observation on this section, I would like to draw attention to the move to narrative amongst the girls as an interesting tool for decision-making. Their use of intertextual biblical or Rabbinic narrative to frame these discussions is notable, as well as the lack of reference to halachic sources as a basis for critique. The only halachic critiques the girls utilize were internal to the story and had to do with the mitzvah of reproduction. Benor (2004), in her comparative study of linguistic patterns in Ultra-Orthodox girls and boys schools, observed very different patterns in boys’ and girls’ learning, patterns that instantiated boys as ‘learners’ and girls as ‘tzedekeses’ or righteous,
generous women. She gives the example of one instance when she asked both classes to debate; the boys choose a legal topic, the girls a social (though religious) one (namely, the age of *bat mitzvah*). Boys brought textual proofs, girls did not. This seemed to happen because the girls lacked confidence in their knowledge of textual sources, as it is not emphasized in their religious education and environment in the same way as for boys. In Yehudia, that the girls had no lack of confidence in their use of text (albeit narrative and not halachic text) paints a stark contrast to Benor’s Ultra-Orthodox educational institution. And while this study is not comparative, it does draw attention to how texts can be framed by gender. We might hypothesize that the girls do not have a broad array of halachic sources on which to draw because of the nature of their education. Or, it may be that the biblical sources are at the core of their religious hermeneutic, as Bible learning forms a larger part of their curriculum at Yehudia than it does for the boys, who focus more on Talmud. Either way, one can begin to see how the materials and content chosen to be part of a curriculum, in this case a gendered one, can impact the way in which its subjects use it in new contexts. Of course, this was not a comparative activity, and so its implications are limited, but they point in an intriguing direction about the power of curriculum, and particularly a gendered curriculum, to impact a religious outlook.

It is also noteworthy that in making moral arguments, the girls did not appeal to universal norms (a very modern notion) or even universal religious/Torah principles (e.g. ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ or ‘stay far away from lying/falsehood’), separate from specific halachic expectations. For these girls, the Bible and Rabbinic narratives are more salient than halachic considerations or universal religious/Torah principles as a guide in their decision-making. Even though abstract theological concepts do arise, as
with Tamar, they are few and rarely taken up as points of argument or reference in the conversations. And yet even as the narrative texts are the first place they go to make sense of a moral dilemma, almost all students ended up making their decision from a very personal place.

**Concluding Thought**

The girls of Yehudia have syncretized their Modern and Orthodox education in unexpected ways that allow their strong sense of autonomy to co-exist with an understanding of textual religious authority. In the big picture, this is both discovered and reinforced within the grammar of their Modern Orthodox schooling, and more specifically, observed in their relationship with the halachic process and traditional text. This is another element that allows the girls to live comfortably with what might otherwise be seen as an unresolvable tension between authority and autonomy.

4.7: *Exercising religious freedom - Religious life in and out of school*

At the conclusion of her study of a Modern Orthodox high school, Devra Lehmann reflects that with the degree of autonomy her students exhibit, she is unsure of how they will accept the demands of religious authority in their lives:

Although individual students went about constructing their identities in different ways, one widespread feature of their constructions…was an insistence on the ability and the right to make one’s decisions for oneself. The implications of this insistence for the student’s continued religious affiliation were unclear to me: even the most religiously committed students were situating themselves with the
Discourse of autonomy and assuming that it would enhance their commitment to Judaism, a Judaism that in the Yeshiva High setting was so firmly situated within the Discourse of authority. (Lehmann, 2007, 335)

This notion is based on an assumption articulated by Charles Taylor, amongst others (Wasserman, 2008), that pits the individualism of modernity against the authority of traditional life. Taylor says that, “We live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn’t control.” Still, some people think that “traditional notions of hierarchy still restrict too much of our freedom to be ourselves” (Taylor, 1991, p. 2). The result, as Lehmann articulates, is that autonomy will push back against the restrictions of authority, and ultimately leading religious practitioners to choose the former over the latter.

It was with this question in mind that I began my time at Yehudia, and it is a question that framed my thinking, as reflected in the early thoughts I recorded in my notebook. As I began to look through my data, I tracked several normatively religious areas of a Modern Orthodox girls’ school, namely modest dress, prayer and Torah learning. In so doing, I uncovered a trend that contextualizes Lehmann’s assumption, and challenges the binary categories of authority and autonomy. In the areas tracked, the girls do not choose between the authority of religion and their own autonomy, rather they choose a religiosity that is distinct from that defined by the school. They choose to align with other instantiations of religious authority that do not fall within the school’s purview. The rationale for these choices will be explored below, as well as the curious
way that choice, to borrow Lehmann’s words, works to “enhance their commitment to Judaism,” even as the choice is one of religion and its implicit authoritative expectations.

This also provides a different frame to the findings of Menachem Bar Lev (1998) in his sociological study on the influence of modernity on young people in Orthodox communities in Israel. Bar Lev describes what he calls Jews who are externally Orthodox – they observe Shabbat, wear kippot or head coverings – but lead the content of their lives in a way that is indistinguishable from their completely secular Israeli counterparts. The girls at Yehudia present a more complex picture. On the one hand, they present in many ways that, as Bar Lev observed, are indistinguishable from their modern counterparts of similar socioeconomic status. I often found myself in the middle of conversations about Celine Dion (the Canadian pop star), boyfriends, YouTube videos, and trips to the local frozen yoghurt store. On the other, many describe a desire for religious life different from the one they experience at school. I have summarized these points of contrast in the chart below, and will develop each area and the common threads between them.

The pattern I observed among the girls centers on the differentiation between a ‘religious rule’ and a ‘school rule.’ Where the school has developed a set of expectations or norms, students do not identify the expected behavior as ‘religious’ or engaging. In contrast, where the school does not create expectations of the students, or in areas that are religious but do not fit into the framework of school regulation, students often do find themselves religiously or spiritually engaged, and this seems to relate to having a sense of

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38 Alan Brill (2004, 2011) is one of the few observers of Modern Orthodoxy who has looked at the influence of contemporary popular Western culture, as well as identifying some of the ways in which Modern Orthodoxy has been impacted by its high percentage of upper-middle and high income earners, and its sociological implications.
choice in these arenas. As such, while external religious compliance without an internal commitment may often be the case in school, with religious matters for which school is not the authoritative structure, girls do find a desire for internal commitment as well. The consistent exception to this rule is religious Zionism about which the girls remain passionate both in and out of school.

The three areas mentioned above – modest dress or tzniut, morning prayer or tefilah and Torah learning, are the three primary arenas for which the school has explicit religious expectations or rules for the girls. Each will be explored separately, and drawn together by their common themes.

**Skirts**

Jewish law around women’s dress, always a central feature of traditional Jewish life (Gortesman & Sztokman, 2013; Rapoport et al., 1994), works within a set of normative and halachic parameters, and yet varies by community. Yehudia girls are expected to wear skirts to school every day that, at minimum, cover their knees. Their shirts cannot be too open at the neck, and neither can the sleeves be too short (sleeveless shirts are certainly forbidden).

In every interview, I asked the girls what an ideal Yehudia girl was like, and amongst a list of various traits, each of them said that wearing a skirt of appropriate

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39 It would seem that Zionism for them is not an abstract commitment, like aspects of traditional religious life, but a lived practice. The girls go to Israel, tour the land, and sometimes relocate there. Their Zionist activities are fun and engaging and very much alive. The belief that their actions contribute to the national redemption of the Jewish people imbues their Israel-related practices with an enthusiasm that acts of ritual practice cannot often lack.

40 While there are also rules of modesty for how boys dress, they do not preoccupy the community nearly to the same extent as those for girls (Gortesman & Sztokman, 2013).
length was one of the criteria, which they defined as being below the knee. They said this even as they added that the average girl did not do this, but wore a shorter skirt. This was the only specific in-school religious behavior that was consistently mentioned as an attribute of a Yehudia girl. Gortesman and Sztokman (2013) similarly found in their interviews of an Israeli all-girls Modern Orthodox high school that the issue of clothing was dominant. They note that, “to the extent that skirts became the primary response to questions about religiousness, reflecting their unwavering understanding that skirts are synonymous with being religious,” (p. 135).

When I asked the girls to describe themselves, not through the eyes of the school’s expectations, they used qualities oriented more around values, like chesed (kindness, acts of generosity or volunteerism), ruach (energy or spirit), and sometimes Shabbat observance, which is an out-of-school ritual. Yet, like the girls of Gortesman and Sztokman’s study, skirts and skirt length have become intrinsically bound up with the definition of a religious girl, and it was a topic they always came back to. Cindy’s response is paradigmatic:

Rafi The first thing you said [that described a Yehudia girl] was religious, what does that mean?

Cindy Like, when you think of Yehudia, it’s a religious school, so 90%, like obviously there are one or two girls in the school who aren’t religious, but in school you see the girls like a religious girl. We dress religiously and everything. We learn Torah, we dresses tzniusly most of the time (laugh). It’s a religious environment. We learn about Shabbos, we learn
about everything a religious girl should be, **like tzniut.**

Cindy returns to the issue of dress three times, re-inscribing its centrality. While the repetitiveness around dress and modesty may be unusually intense here, it marks modest dress as a primary concern for Cindy as the essence of religiosity.

As with any factor that looms this large in a cultural environment, skirts become the focal point around which the girls’ religious identity and sense of autonomy coalesce. Daniella says:

> I didn’t want to be the type of person who goes out with their friends wearing pants, the girl that is like wearing skirts down to her ankles, cause that’s just what her school does. Like I’m here cause this is what I chose.

On one hand, wearing pants out of school is a rebellion of one variety, although it is not clear from here if it is against the school’s rules or traditional *halacha*. However, it is placed in parallel with wearing a long skirt when done primarily to conform to the school rules. When this happens, it is not seen as an explicit religious choice, but an act of obedience to the school’s expectations. While she does not express what that middle ground of skirt-wearing looks like, it is that middle where Daniella chooses to place herself, and it is there that her religious expression occurs. In this way she owns that which is otherwise a school expectation/rule around modest dress. The implication is that Daniella accepts a certain level of modesty as religiously normative, but sees no added force or value in the fact that it is also a school rule. She is willing to observe the rule, but it is not because the school expects it of her.
Gortesman and Sztokman (2013) similarly found a relationship between school rules and tzniut. They find that “[T]he skirt is seen as preempting other kinds of provocation – such as questioning rules, and perhaps even being more provocative toward religion in general” (p. 135). Related to this, they observe, that dress “is about obedience to rules, authority and halakha,” and that “…there is a perceived and expressed connection between the female body cover, obedience to school rules, and obedience to halakha,” (p. 140). The skirt is a physical embodiment of how the school teaches the girls to be unobtrusive and gentle. Here too, obedience to the rules of tzniut are bound up with obedience, or a pushing back against school rules, with the result being that Daniella accepts their religious value as meaningful in one space but not another. She can accept the authority in a personal space, but not an institutional one.

Daniella and Samantha make the distinction between in- and out-of-school dress clearer in another part of that same conversation.

Rafi: What’s this place like religiously?

Daniella: A lot of the girls are at different levels outside of school. But like, inside of school you mean?

Rafi: I don’t necessarily mean that. In the big picture.

Samantha: Like, we consider ourselves Modern Orthodox of (the city where Yehudia is located), which is different than Modern Orthodox of New York, cause Modern Orthodox of New York is less religious than Modern Orthodox of (Yehudia’s city).

Daniella: As in New York that means Chicago, LA, Montreal, everywhere. But
like, like, I don’t see myself as like, a Lubavitcher.\textsuperscript{41}

Rafi So what distinguishes you from them?

Samantha Um,

Daniella We’ve got better morals.

Samantha You know how there’s a ton of Modern Orthodox schools in New York, so like the most religious of those, it’s still Modern Orthodox, but that’s the most religious of that, then that’s us.

Daniella (Named a Modern Orthodox girls school in New York)

Rafi What looks different or sounds different?

Samantha Most girls wear skirts outside of schools, most girls in our grade.

Daniella Yeah

Samantha Most girls in our grade, I don’t know about most girls in the whole school. Probably.

Daniella A lot of girls here only wear skirts. Basically all the girls in (other places) only wear pants outside of school. There’s like the odd few, but they’re the odd few. The girls that wear outside of school here are normal.

For Daniella and Samantha, girls not only wear skirts in school, which would represent simply following the rules, but outside school as well. This is why Samantha modifies her statement to say that “Most girls wear skirts outside of schools” and not simply that most girls wear skirts. The distinction implying that the practice has real religious import, and

\textsuperscript{41} A sect of Hasidism
they are not simply about following the school’s rules. Moreover, in contrast to the Modern Orthodox norm that they see amongst their friends in other cities, this distinction makes Yehudia girls seem much more religious. This is the case even though, as they note at the outset, “a lot of the girls are at different levels outside of school.” Malka similarly notes that the religious girls are those “that don’t wear pants outside of school.” Rachel describes a successful Yehudia student as those who “dress the same way in and out of school and not feel any conflicts going on there.” Thus, wearing skirts outside of school is considered a sign of religious commitment. This notion is interesting when brought back to the girls’ perception of Ma’ayan students, who are expected to wear skirts outside of school. For them, doing so would not represent religious commitment, since it came out of a school expectation. However for a Yehudia student, its voluntary practice outside of school gives it a different meaning.

Gorsetman and Sztokman (2013) discuss an event at the school they studied called Tzniut (modesty) Day – a day of assemblies, speeches, workshops and classes on the subject of modesty. Based on one excerpt of a young Rabbi speaking to the girls, they observe that, “The rabbi has set up a rationale of excessive body cover based on the concepts of man’s nature to be uncontrollably stimulated by girls, and girls’ responsibility to manage men’s desire,” (p. 132). This is very much like the approach I observed in Rabbi Shemesh’s class, where he introduced the girls to a piece of Talmudic text that described an important Rabbi’s desire for a woman that was not his wife. This was intended to help the girls understand how men think, and how powerful their sexual desires are, as part of the larger question of how to interact with them. For both Rabbi Shemesh and the rabbi from the aforementioned study, the assumption is that it is the
duty of girls “to keep men chaste” (p.133). For Gortesman and Sztokman the implication is that a good girl is also a modest girl, and she will cover herself for the sake of men. Modesty is therefore outward facing, and about concern for others. This explains, in the context of Yehudia as well, why skirts and modesty are so central – they confirm a girl as ‘good’ in so far as she has acted to protect the other, who is always male, from seeing a body that is inappropriately covered.

This approach is quite unlike the rationale that Mahmood (2005) discovers amongst the women who cover themselves in Egypt. She explains that, “in the face of a corrosive and corrupt Western ethos, one that seems interested only in uncovering women for the pleasure of men, the act of covering oneself is framed as a subversion of the dominant culture’s insidious designs on women’s bodies – an embodiment of female power and pride” (p. 47).

And yet it is not clear what the impact of this expectation around modesty has on the girls. Gonick (2003), in studying contemporary Canadian girl-culture looks at the ways in which young women relate to their bodies, specifically along the “passive vs. slutty” continuum, and the implications this has for a discourse of femininity, which she understands as a woman coming to see her body as the object of another’s gaze. At Yehudia, the continuum is less clear, even as they are taught that they are the object of a male gaze. On one hand, the position explained by Rabbi Shemesh presents a parallel to this notion, with the girls being charged with protecting the male from seeing her, thus instantiating her own goodness. On the other hand, because girls so closely connect the obligation of tzniut to school rules, they become detached from its deeper significance as religious precepts or principles of feminine identity. Instead, they are simply school rules
that, as such, hold little value in that context (and are even pushed back against!), even as they may have more significance outside of the school’s walls.

Tova’s description of one of the social groups in her grade helps make sense of a particular approach to the rules. She said that the grade was divided in two, and she was describing the group that she was not a part of.

Tova: They’re in like the cool group, not like the popular group… They have like ‘other’ friends. Oh, they’re like fake religious, you know what I mean? They still wear their fake skirts, you know?

Rafi: What is ‘fake religious’ as opposed to ‘real religious’? Help me understand the difference.

Tova: They only do it in school so people are like, oh my God you’re so religious, and like the teacher’s love them and the administration loves them, you know.

Rafi: And what happens outside of school?

Tova: They’re just regular Joe shmoes.

The school, in Tova’s eyes, values conformity to explicit religious behaviors, of which wearing skirts is the most overt. However, she understands this as no more than following the school rules, and not as real commitment to religious rules, or ‘fake religious’. Only behavior outside of school, where there is not institutional expectation to wear a particular kind of clothing, confirms a person’s true religiosity. And who are those girls? They are those who Tova says, “look more religious.” Good Yehudia girls follow the school’s rules and dress in what looks like a religious manner. These girls are ‘quiet,’
they are not loud and do not push back against the school’s expectations, but this says nothing about their broader, out-of-school religious commitments. For Tova, this makes in-school religious behavior more about compliance than authentic commitment. By creating this standard, the school implicitly teaches the girls what it values, a value that a girl like Tova rejects.

The emerging theme is of a distinction between in- and out-of-school religious behavior. In school religious behavior is about following school rules. Authentic religious behavior, following Tova and Samantha above, can only exist or be confirmed when it happens outside of school. This distinction is an important factor about how religious behavior comes to be seen as valid or invalid for these girls. This complicates the role of the school’s authority when it overlaps with religious authority, as the school’s authority seems to taint religious practice with a sense of inauthenticity, or at least questionable validity in these girls’ eyes.

Prayer

Prayer is another area where the girls’ expressions of explicit religiosity comes out, when one contrasts their experience in school (shacharit or morning prayer) and outside the school’s expectations (mincha or afternoon prayer, and camp prayer). Shacharit is mandatory in school, while mincha is not. Camp prayer, however, is mandatory, but stands in contrast to school prayer, as we shall see.

In the following, Daniella discussed her experience of prayer at school and at camp, and the way in which the school’s expectations impinge upon her experience of prayer.
Daniella: But like, our bus (at camp) was like, like, I saw the way my friends, not my counselors, were *davening* (praying), and it made me want to be a better person. Like my friends were the people that inspired me. It was, like, cool if you were *davening* with *kavanah* (intention).

Rafi: It’s not like that here?

Daniella: No.

Rafi: Why?

Daniella: Because here, people *daven*, they’re at davening because they have to be there, because they’re taking attendance. That’s why at *mincha* I have more *kavanah*, I have more *kavanah* during *mincha* than at *shacharit*.

Rafi: But at camp they made you daven!

Daniella: But we wanted to. There we wanted to. It made a different atmosphere. It was the type of people that were there. The whole atmosphere of davening was better.

And for a long time it affected me in school, and then it slowly started to go away from me, because the people there created the atmosphere, and the people here create the atmosphere, but it’s not the same atmosphere.

Rafi: So what are they creating?

Daniella: Here they’re creating a place where they don’t want to be here,
so they’re just talking. They’re not really like, if they are
davening, they’re not saying the words, not really meaning them,
do you know what I’m saying? Like, like here they care about
the marks. There we cared about things that are important.
That’s why, like, to us, it's not so important to care so much
about school now. Like, obviously it’s important to do well, but
it's not so important to dwell on our marks. We realize that now,
and a lot of people don’t.

After expressing how much prayer at camp inspires her, Daniella contrasts this with her
school experience, and uses aspects of the “grammar of schools” (Lynn-Sachs, 2011) as
her points of distinction. At school, she notes, they take attendance, and the girls “have
to” be present. She continues, “Like, like here they care about the marks. There we cared
about things that are important.” This is unlike the afternoon prayer service at school,
which is optional, and as such leaves room for her to have more kavanah or intention. It
is the authority of school that turns her off, not the expectation of prayer. When I point
out to her that camp also obligates her to pray, she responds that “we wanted to,” and
“there we cared about things that are important.” The contrast implies that it is not the
presence of authority (religious, school or camp) that prevents prayer from being
meaningful, but the presence of a specific kind of authority, one connected to the
grammar of schools, that dampens the religious feeling of the activity. It is not the
religious expectation that turns her off, but the social or institutional context in which that
expectation is couched (school vs. camp), that fosters or dampens the desire to participate
in a religious experience.
Rivki also notices the way in which the grammar of school impacts her experience of prayer, in contrast to the atmosphere of camp (which is the same camp that Daniella goes to, a Modern Orthodox camp):

Rivki  The things we discussed came up in our camp *chinuch* (religious education classes), which we do, those thing like get really intense, and I think I’ve learned the most there than anything I’ve learned throughout high school probably, that’s relevant to me know, that’s actually left an impact, by far.

Rafi  12 months, 10 months you’re at Yehudia and 2 months you’re at camp and camp has made a bigger impact?

Rivki  On me religiously? 100%

Rafi  Why? Tell me about that.

Rivki  You’re secluded, you’re like, you’re in this place, you’re locked, you’re not effected by the outside world, that’s first of all. Everything, what’s going on is like the norm, like, *davening*, like, everyone, people still skip *mincha*, they think it’s cool they think it’s funny and like everyone’s lazy, but like, I’d want to go *daven mincha*, I still do, I go here, but, it started there. What made me want to *daven* here started in [camp]. When we have discussions in *chinuch*, she’s not, like, there’s not testing.

Rivki reiterates the challenge of prayer when it is connected to the grammar of school, stating, “When we have discussions in *chinuch*, she’s not, like, there’s not testing.”

Jewish education at camp is felt not to be preparation for tests, but rather for the sake of
the learner herself. At camp Rivki uncovers a deeper element of prayer as the norm in that environment, which is not a norm at school. Rivki associated this norm with being in an immersive environment, which for her is a lived, and not an academic, experience. As with Daniella, this lived experience stands in contrast to the stigma that comes along with prayer being attached to tests, grades and school expectations.42

Shira confirms the relationship between religious practice and school, and the challenge it poses: “We're taught everything. But we’re taught at an academic level, so... you have to keep the rules, and there are rules at school, and you have to do well on your tests.” The Modern Orthodoxy that the girls learn at school is not the lived experience that so invigorated Daniella or Rivki at camp, but an academic, tested, school-rule version of Judaism. Doing well at Judaism in school is bound up with the grammar of schools, and is what turns Daniella and Rivki off.

Following up on the comment referenced in the previous paragraph, Shira continues by saying, “I mean for me religion is more like, I believe that God is God and therefore I’m going to keep whatever He says. And it’s not because oh, you should keep this because then you’re going to feel like this and that and that.” Shira’s response is interesting because of its juxtaposition to her comment about the grammar of school and how religion is taught at an academic level, thus contrasting a religious practice that is inspired by school rules and grades-oriented, which these girls see as an illegitimate motivation, to one that is personally motivated, even if it is without reasons. For Shira, “God is God and therefore I’m going to keep whatever He says.” This is very unlike what we found about in Rabbi Shemesh’s class and its focus on reasons, with his assumption

42 Note the conceptual parallel between this case and my understanding of Zionism in their religious lives in footnote #38 above.
that girls needed reasons for their religious belief. One wonders if ‘reasons’ are part of what Shira is pointing to when she references the ‘academic’ content she is taught at school that she contrasts to her non-rational personal motivations for religious practice.

Bracha implicitly notes the way that mincha operates as a ritual that demonstrates the difference between those who follow the rules and those who are more religious:

Yesterday we were in art, and we went into like overtime, we went into like mincha time, and one of my friends is like okay, like you guys should really go into mincha right now, and then like a few of those girls whatever, they're like oh, who cares. So like, like, if that's how they want to be that's fine. Like, I'll like, I respect them no matter what. Whatever choices in life they make that's fine, but like, that's just. It's hard for me to like, like I don't want to be influenced like that, I don't want to be influenced through them because I want to have a balance in my life because it's hard.

Mincha here is not a school expectation, but a personal choice of religious expression, and a religious obligation. For Bracha, there is an understanding that religious girls should choose to spend a few minutes and complete the mincha prayer, and she distinguishes herself from those who choose not to go. Her understanding of “choice” and the need to respect it is also interesting. It draws attention to the deep influence that modern culture has on these girls. Mincha thus becomes a litmus test for authentic religiosity, because it is not a school expectation but instead an exercise of free choice, in much the same vein as wearing skirts outside of school.
Tamar brings the two threads of prayer and tzniut together around center point of personal choice, nicely illustrating the way in which these rituals, which are clear markers of religious identity when detached from the school, operate:

Tamar

And then there are some people who just are Jewish and they know they have to follow rules, but it, like it’s not so important to them and they do it because they have to. And they also sometimes push the limits a bit because nobody is watching or they think it’s cool, or they never really tried thinking about why these rules are important so like I don’t have to follow them, or maybe I can disrespect other people.

Rafi

So that questioning part that you do, you don’t feel that they ask those questions?

Tamar

Like in davening, some people just, I have a lot of problems with davening, I sometimes do it and I sometimes don’t, but I’m constantly trying to find out why. But other people just don’t do it because I don’t really see a point in this so I’m not going to do it. Or like, the way they dress. Like, I wear pants because I thought about it and it just made sense to me, and I feel like I’m still following the laws of tzniut that work, and I feel that other people just wear mini-shorts and tank-tops just because they can and nobody’s telling them not to. I don’t believe they thought about it. About what they’re doing and why they’re doing it.
Tamar begins with a critique of those whose Jewish behavior is primarily motivated by a desire to follow the rules, without deeper consideration. Her own dedication is something she has gained from introspection around central Jewish questions. The two examples she gives are prayer and tzniut. In light of the trends outlined above, it is not surprising that these two religious practices are grouped together for the girls at school. They are the two primary areas of ritual that the school demands of them, and in order to be authentic, ought to be self-motivated (“I thought about it,” “I feel that,” “I don’t see a point”). Although wearing pants is less common amongst girls in her community and is often seen as a rebellion against religiosity, for Tamar the decision comes from a place of personal choice, and as such fits into her religious schema.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Rules/Expectations/Norms</th>
<th>Outside of School Rules/Optional/Choice</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Morning Prayer at school: School rule = not religiously inspiring</td>
<td>2. Afternoon prayer at school or Camp Prayer: Choice/not part of the grammar of schools = religiously inspiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Torah Learning: For tests and marks = not inspiring or engaging</td>
<td>3. Torah Learning: In Seminary = fun/growth/spiritual/inspiring/engaging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the developing pattern, modest dress, like prayer, is rejected or seen negatively when it is couched as a school rule. However, it finds positive resonance in non-school
contexts, where girls do not find themselves constrained by the inauthenticity of a religious practice that is regulated by the school.

4.8: Where is the passion? Learning Torah beyond school

The dichotomy drawn above, between school-required and optional religious activities, and between in- and out-of-school religious behaviors, is further extended in the girls understanding of seminary. In the North American Modern Orthodox context, the vast majority of high school graduates spend the year between high school and college at a single-sex school in Israel or what the girls refer to as ‘seminary’ (Berger, Jacobson & Waxman, 2007). While each girls’ seminary has its own curriculum and set of goals (some with a total focus on learning Torah, some with a split between learning Torah and chesed activities, and some with an emphasis on a Talmudic learning that parallels the yeshiva experience of boys), none have courses in general studies, and put emphasis on fostering the desire and know-how for Orthodox Jewish life.

Some have suggested that this “gap year” acts as a kind of religious finishing school for Modern Orthodox teenagers, giving them the religious inspiration that they lacked in high school (Berger, Jacobson & Waxman, 2007). The girls share some notion of this, seeing seminary as the place where they will experience Judaism more deeply, in contrast to their high school experience. In a conversation with Alana and Leah, I asked why there seems to be a lack of religious energy at Yehudia. They said the following:

Leah No, there’s definitely not that here.

Alana You need those people that make it enthusiastic, that at the same
time are smart, they’re not just like, oh Torah, but they’re actually, really, like, try to inspire.

Rafi

Does that happen in other places in your life?

Leah

I feel like that’s what everyone talks about in seminary, that like yeah, don't worry, as in, it’s very, a lot of times I’ve heard when people like yeah, I’m so nervous about learning in seminary all day, I’ve heard so many time from people. They’re like, no, don’t worry, you’ll have great teachers, it’s very different than high school.

Seminary is seen as very different from high school, both as a place where learning is much more serious, and also as a place of religious passion. Though neither girl has been through this experience, it is a cultural expectation that seminary is a place where they will find the religious passion and pleasure in learning Torah that is missing from their present high school experience.

Esther makes a similar observation about the anticipated impact of seminary, in contrast to the experience of religious life at school:

And Torah I think you learn it and you learn it in school, and you’re always getting tested on it, and you never learn it for fun. And I think that if you ask me stuff next year after seminary you’ll get completely different answers for so many things.

Esther contrasts the testing mode at school to the experience at seminary, much as the marks aspect of tefilah was contrasted with mincha and camp. Seminary is where Torah
learning for “fun” will happen, unlike learning that happens for tests, which by definition is not fun. She expects that her thoughts about Torah and Judaism will be greatly changed after the experience, presumably for the positive.

Daniella extends the contrast between school and seminary, noting the way in which the former is deadening to religious passion.

Next year, the things that you’re learning you like care about learning, you know, first of all, there’s so many classes and you get to choose which classes you want, so like, what you’re learning is because you want to be learning it, and at the end of the day, it’s not just oh, I need to learn it for my test, it’s like, I’m learning this because I want to be here and I want to be learning it, and also, the teachers are like going to have a different ideology, because they’re not just teaching for the tests and exams also, which I kind of feel is in most of the classes here, and a lot of them whatever, but there the teachers want you to gain knowledge, the teachers want you to get what you want to get out of it, so they cater to you there kind of. (emphasis added)

Choice and personal fulfillment (what “you want”) are the key elements in why seminary is expected to be a positive religious experience. Choice here exists in a seminary girl’s capacity to choose what she “wants” to learn, instead of have a curriculum set by the school, and in the sense that the individual chooses to be there in the first place. It is this capacity to act on her own desire that makes seminary valuable to Daniella. Notice the amount of times (in bold) this notion of “wanting” repeats itself, and the personal way in which it is framed, first in the second person, and then in the first.
Shira confirms the absence of desire at school, in contrast to her own feelings about the value of Jewish Studies.

Shira  … I know it is important. I want to learn it. And, like, it’s really the reason why I’m here. I mean, Yehudia is a great school and everything else, and we’re going to a Jewish school because we want to learn.

Rafi  And you don’t think other people quite recognize that?

Shira  No

Rafi  They’re thinking of this place how?

Shira  It’s still a Jewish school, and honestly a very important part of going to this school is being with people that are at your level, your religious level, because social pressures are so huge. But, yeah, I don’t know, people like leave half the time when we have two Hebrew classes. So, I don’t know. People grow up a certain way, and it’s just the way things are…

Rafi  What’s the way things are?

Shira  You keep Shabbos, you keep kosher, it’s just what you do, what you grew up with. So a lot of people don’t really question why we’re doing this. So, at some level it’s almost like you don’t really care about doing it, it’s just what you do. It’s really simple to keep kosher and keep Shabbos in our community. There’s nothing to it.

Shira first frames the reason for being at Yehudia as a result of wanting to learn, although it is not clear if she is explaining a ‘party line’ or a personal desire. Either way, she
quickly confirms that desire is indeed absent from the girls at school, as far as she can
tell. This lack of interest is evidenced by her observation of the girls’ willingness to
easily skip Jewish Studies classes. It is this lack of desire that those cited above contrast
with their perception of the religious vitality they will find in seminary.

Daniella brings up teachers, and the different attitudes she perceives seminary and
high school teachers as having. High school teachers teach to the test, instead of purely
for the sake of knowledge. This is interesting because while the girls of Yehudia almost
never describe religious passion in their high school experience, teachers, and the passion
they elicit, are one of the few places in school where girls do observe passion for
religious life. Daniella and Samantha themselves noted this to me in one of our
conversations.

Samantha: I feel like (the former site principal) used to talk, I mean be very
passionate and say, about things, about Judaism, about like,
things that we wanted to hear, and like I was excited
whenever…

Daniella: That’s true.

Samantha: …if a teacher wasn’t there and he would fill in and just give us
like a shiur (Torah lecture), like, I enjoyed listening to him, and
he like had like a lot of good things to say.
Daniella

Between me and you, the other day (the present head of school), he like came in to give us a shiur, he came in and like we take it as a joke. Like, no one’s interested, the way he talks isn’t appealing, no one wants to hear from him. It’s boring. But like, when (the former principal) came in to talk to us, he’d like, get up with all his energy and his excitement and his face would turn red, and he would be like, do you know what I’m saying? Just the fact that he gets excited gets everyone else into it.

The message here is that religious passions could be aroused or depleted by an individual teacher, but not by the material itself, or the larger framework of religious life at Yehudia. The expectation of passionate learning is pushed off beyond high school to seminary, where there are no tests, and where learning happens for its own sake.

4.9: Concluding remarks

The pattern that emerges in tracing these central elements of Modern Orthodox girls’ religious life – tzniut, prayer and Torah learning – is complex and revealing. It challenges the assumption that autonomy means a rejection of the expectations of religious authority. Girls embrace religious life and practice in each of the areas discussed, with the proviso that the expectation toward practice or commitment does not come from the school. School-based religious practice, and the authority that it enacts to compel these behaviors and expectations, are rejected – but not the underlying practices and the expectations to be observant in other circumstances. The presence of autonomy, which is most clearly indicated in Daniella’s discussion of seminary above, but is
common throughout, does not result in the expected rejection of authority as such. Rather, it becomes an avenue through which religious commitment and practice is re-inscribed in non-school terms. Possible implications of these observations will be discussed in the concluding chapter.
Chapter 5: Findings-Part Two

Gender in Modern Orthodoxy

As discussed in methodology chapter, there were specific reasons why I chose to study a Modern Orthodox girls’ school instead of a boys’ school. Traditional Jewish life still retains elements of patriarchy, hierarchy and essentialized notions of gender. Therefore I hypothesized that a study of how girls negotiated these elements in relationship to the modern assumptions of Modern Orthodoxy, as well as their own cultural surroundings, would yield more interesting and useful data regarding how the modern/traditional and autonomy/authority discourses were being negotiated. As such, the division in this study between gender and autonomy/authority is mostly formal, as will become clear in the first section below on girls and rule-following, and its implication for how students at Yehudia were encouraged to stay within the authoritative fold of Modern Orthodoxy. However, because there are some other implications of my findings about gender and Modern Orthodoxy that are broader than the autonomy/authority lens, I have created a separate section for the exploration of gender.

5.1: Following the rules – It’s a girl thing

Being a ‘good girl’ is a ubiquitous marker in Orthodox Jewish religious circles, even as many of its elements are similar to cultural values for girls in the world-at-large. There are a common set of markers at Yehudia for what counts in order to be a good girl, and this definition is placed in contrast with what a ‘boy’ is. This is the case even though boys are not given the adjective ‘bad’, and even as their behavior is placed in marked contrast with that of girls and spoken of in derisive terms. I will explore these
descriptions here as a way to further understand the religious compliance (and lack of rebelliousness or dissonance) I found amongst the Modern Orthodox girls at Yehudia, despite their strong sense of autonomy, and the ways in which some of boundaries are transgressed by them as well.

There are a number of markers of a ‘good girl’ in the Yehudia context. Primary amongst them is a quality of passivity, sometimes described as positive, and sometimes as the absence of action. In our interview, Cindy said that “listening”, referring to listening to and following the directions of authority, is a quality of the ideal Yehudia girl. Leah spoke about the passivity implicit in being a good girl as not pushing back against the administration or authority. Referring to a time in late March when half the grade got in trouble, she says that, “we’re just known as being good girls. We literally, this is the first time in like all four years that I can think of that our grade has gone against the administration.” They are a grade that is known for following the rules and not pushing back against the expectations of authority, presumably even when they disagree or think them wrong. This fits with the 1992 American Association of University Women (AAUW) study that became the book “How Schools Shortchange Girls” (Bailey et al., 1992), where the authors conclude similarly that girls are encouraged to be quiet and orderly. According to this study, boys, on the other hand, are supported and encouraged in showing show initiative and intelligence. Below I will explore how the girls see this happening with the boys, despite their two campuses being several miles apart.

Tova describes this same notion but from the point of view of the administration’s expectations of an ideal Yehudia girl.
I think our school, the administration-wise, values, like, the quiet girls, the girls who wouldn’t do anything against their rules, so it doesn’t matter if they’re more religious or not, it just matters that they look more religious.

As has been found in other studies (Thorne, 1993), the school indicates what gender appropriate behaviors are: that the girls are meant to be passive and obedient, with their obedience indicating religiosity, masked as compliance with the schools rules, some of which are religious in nature. Like Leah, Tova describes the school’s ideal as someone who is quiet and does not rebel against the school’s rules, a construction that emphasizes the negative aspect of inaction. She also conflates not pushing back against school rules and behaving religiously, which is to say, that by observing and not rejecting school (including religious) rules, one is valued by the administration. Tova similarly conflates being quiet and following the rules with religiosity. When I asked her what the markers of religiosity were from a school point of view, she said, “For a lot of (girls), it’s like you’re not so loud, and you always follow the dress code, make sure your skirts are covering your knee…”. This fits into a larger pattern, wherein what a Modern Orthodox Yehudia girl learns is that what is valued in a school context is less about what religious activities she engages in than the fact that she abstains from any rebellious or counter-religious behaviors. Thus, a Yehudia girl maintains her religious life by maintaining her good girl status, and this has less to do with what she does (engage in religious activity) than by what she does not do (rebel against the rules).

This fits into a larger set of norms around the boundary of Modern Orthodox identification. Jewish religious law is split into positive or active mitzvot, where religious action or ritual is performed (e.g. giving charity) and negative mitzvot, which prescribe
the absence of action (e.g. do not kill). It may also therefore be that the religious identifications that Samantha points to above, and those with which Rivki is comfortable, are about their not transgressing explicit and public *mitzvot* like Shabbat or kashrut, rather than a strong positive enactment of religious expectations. In this way, one can refrain from regular prayer, Torah study or the like, and still be considered religious by the norms of this community, but cannot transgress Shabbat or kashrut and be similarly seen. This distinction helps explain the lack of explicit ‘religious’ exhortation or practice I noticed time and again at Yehudia.

Tova later contrasts girl and boy norms, in a way that elucidates what has been described above:

I think the administration and the teachers are a little more afraid of the boys, and they don’t really know what the boys are going to do, whereas with us, even if half of us want to do something bad, there’s always in every single class those good girls who like don’t want to do it, but the boys, even if you’re like the good boy, none of those boys want to be the one who isn’t having the fun and isn’t doing it, but with girls it’s like, okay, if there’s one girl who isn’t going to do it, no one will do it because they don't want to be the ones getting in trouble. Using the good/bad dichotomy, boys are understood to be more willing to follow the ‘bad’ path, yet not have their status be tainted by their behaviors, while girls, even when they want to stray, usually refrain from doing so because of the stigma and fear of consequences. This would not be ‘okay.’ The girls’ are reluctant to break the rules and place themselves into the ‘bad’ category, something which boys are not only more willing to do, but can do so without sacrificing their ‘good’ status. When discussing these
rules, transgressions, or lack thereof, the few behaviors discussed were not specifically religious in nature; rather they were about school expectations, some of which had religious implications (e.g. Purim preparation, the shabbaton, or the contrast between ruach and the boys’ rowdiness).

Sarah similarly describes the binary between boys and girl, between being quiet and rowdy, respecting and breaking rules.

Well obviously they’re different in the sense how they act in school. Like they’re more rowdy, we’re a little bit more quieter, you know, we’re more respectable than the boys, but if they do something unrespectable the school would be fine with it, but if we do something unrespectable, they’re not fine with it. We’re all punished.

By not responding to the boys' rule-breaking, but responding to the girls, the school implicitly accepts and reinforces (from the girls’ point of view) a culture in which girls are rule followers and boys are rule breakers. As noted above, this becomes not just about behavior in general, but relates closely to religious expectations. Note the dichotomy between being rowdy and quiet, which is parallel to the AAUW study references above. As Tova was quoted above, “it doesn’t matter if they’re (the quiet girls) more religious or not, it just matters that they look more religious.” Shira similarly says that “I don’t know any girls are like bad a lot of the times, not following what the school stands for. At least they hide it better.” Good and bad are measured by the school’s values and what they stand for, which includes its religious rules and philosophies.

One day, when I was speaking with Daniella and Samantha, they tried to explain to me why “men are better” than girls, which for them means that, “it’s easier to be a
“guy” and “you succeed more when you’re a guy.” To explain why boys ‘succeed’ more, they said that it is because boys “don’t really have a conscience” but, “girls care about
doing everything right… We’re different.” On one hand, girls are rule followers, and that is why they are not ‘successful’\(^{43}\) like boys. Because boys lack a conscience, they feel no qualms about not following the rules, which allows them to be successful, and by their definition, “better.” Although they frame the girls’ desire to do “right” in the positive, its implication is, like above with Tova and Leah, clearly a negative in the big picture. Doing right is not about doing good things, but about the limitations that come to girls by their need to follow the rules. Here the girls are expressing their awareness of a gendered social expectation, which includes religious rules, and can thus be understood as one of the reasons why Modern Orthodox girls, despite their strong sense of autonomy, do not rebel against religious norms.

Cindy describes the relationship between the girls’ obedience and the way in which it hides their transgressions.

Rafi Describe what a typical Yehudia girl is.

Cindy Religious girl that like has a lot of ruach, spirit, likes to learn Hebrew stuff, I don’t know. A nice girl. I don’t know. Classic Yehudia girl – skips class, eats a lot of food. Does everything they could to get around something.

Rafi I thought that was a boy thing (referring to the boy’s school)?

\(^{43}\) In using the word ‘successful’ they seemed to be speaking generically about life, not about religious practice in particular, as will become clearer in their words below.
Cindy: It is. It’s also a Yehudia girl thing.

Rafi: So why don’t the Yehudia girls admit it?

Cindy: Cause boys do it more, and boys do it more, and girls get in trouble. That’s the difference. It’s like the boys don’t listen, they just do what they want and get away with everything. We like listen. Someone tells us to go to class and we all run to class. We might try to talk our way out of it. Or we’ll try to talk our way up to get better marks.

Rafi: So why are there differences between boys and girls?

Cindy: The girls listen and the boys don't. We’ll try to talk but we’ll end up doing the right thing at the end of the day.

Rafi: Why?

Cindy: I don’t know. Cause the girls are scared of the administration?

Even though girls try not to follow the rules, at the end of the day, most end up doing so. They revert to their norm as rule followers, in contrast to boys who overtly break the rules. But when asked why girls do this, Cindy is not sure. It seems it is simply taken for granted. The freedom to rebel is, from this perspective, distinctly gendered. Boys emerge with the ‘privilege’ of rebellion - something denied to girls.

It is interesting to note that Daniella and Samantha contrast themselves to this model of Modern Orthodox femininity. Although they do not say that they are like the male stereotype, they quite explicitly do not place themselves in the female category.

Daniella: Like, we had career day, and all these women, there was one room of
women that were all married and working and saying how, I work at home, cause I have to be there for carpool and like whatever, so like, after when there was like question time, I was like, do you feel like you sacrifice your career because you wanted to like get married and have a Jewish family? And they’re all like, I don’t look at it as sacrificing my career, like, when you want to be a mother, like, you give up certain things. K, like that’s a sacrifice. (laughing)

Samantha: Like, there was, I couldn't like be an actual doctor, cause there wasn’t enough hours for me to be there for my kids, so I was a physicians assistant.

Rafi: And this bothers you?

Samantha: It doesn’t bother me. It’s just classic woman.

Rafi: But you’re not going to do that.

Samantha: I’m not going to do that. I don’t have to be the classic woman.

Rafi: The girls in your grade – do you think you’re going to be the norm, or they’re going to be like these women you saw?

Daniella: I think most of them will be like these women.

Samantha: Yeah

Here Daniella and Samantha contrast themselves first with the female models they’ve been presented with, who they see as similar to the girls in their school. They take this point of contrast a step further later in the conversation.
Daniella: (Guys) care less about a lot of things, and caring less makes it easier to do well.

Samantha: Guys are jackasses, right, so they can get those positions that are high up there and fire the people below them like it’s nothing. They’re mean. (laughing). So, because they don’t really have a conscience, like you know, you’re a guy.

Daniella: Girls care about doing everything right…. We’re different.

The way they set up a binary implies that they desire to be or perhaps identify with aspects of masculinity, in so far as they are different from the female norms that surround them around following the rules. This contrast is traced by Pomerantz (2004) in the skater girls she observes, who reject normative femininity by participating in skate culture, which is socially masculine. By doing this, Pomerantz and her colleagues say, the girls are enacting a kind of feminism, even though it doesn’t partake of the traditional markers for how the word has been used in the past. That is to say, while the skater girls (or Daniella and Samantha) do not challenge inequality on larger social or cultural issues, they are challenging gender norms, and the imbalance take shape in their private spaces. Daniella and Samantha similarly situate themselves as boundary crossers, not in the public or religious space, but, like the skater girls, by adopting aspects of the male norms that they encounter – which includes rejecting obedience to the rules. Unlike their friends, they are not going to be a ‘classic woman’ who sacrifices her career for her family. Rather, they will be like men – they will break the rules and trod their own path.
5.2: Ruach as loud, quiet as obedience

While a number of the girls above describe the ‘good girl’ (from the school’s perspective) as quiet, both my observations and the girls’ own descriptions make clear that it is not reticence that they mean, but as they say, obedience to the rules. In fact, one of the most common adjectives girls used when asked to describe a Yehudia girl was _ruach_, which means spirit or energy, but also refers to being loud and exercising leadership, and is a marker of high status in the school.

After Tova described the ideal Yehudia girl from the school’s point of view, I asked her to tell me what this ideal girl looks like from the girls’ point of view. She said, “From the kid’s point of view, okay, someone who likes to sing, someone who’s loud…”. A girl with _ruach_ is outgoing and energetic, not passive or quiet. Alana, responding to her friends’ comments that there are two types of Yehudia girls, described one type as “sometimes, like, crazy, you know like, Yehudia, you know, a lot of _ruach_…”. Rivki, in response to the same question about a typical Yehudia girl said:

I can tell you what comes to mind, it’s not really expectations, it’s just like what I see. It’s someone who’s like always bubbly, there’s _ruach_ and they’re always trying to get into things, and make anything that’s like kind of not so fun, always finding the fun. Not in a bad way, not in a not educational way. In a way that’s like fun, and, I don’t know.

_Ruach_ does not necessarily have religious overtones, and yet it is key part of what makes someone an ideal Yehudia girl. Like basketball at the boys’ school, _ruach_ is something that gives a girl status at school.
Wellen-Levin (2003), in her study of Lubavitch teenage girls, makes a similar observation:

From the beginning, I was impressed by the Lubavitch girls’ command and power – qualities that, within their all-girls domain, were not only tolerated but encouraged. I asked many young women what sort of person was well liked as Bais Rivka. By far the most popular answer was the loud girl. (13-14)

She contrasts this to research about girls and the way they draw inward as they come to adolescence, away from the playfulness and outwardness of their youth. The Lubavitch girls she studies do not seem to make quite this same move, which she considers a testament to a type of freedom that they are granted. Wellen-Levin feels that Lubavitch girls have an emotional openness that is usually repressed amongst young girls. She suggests a number of reasons, but does not come a conclusion about which are the most important: the safety of single-sex environment, a tight-knit community, religious faith, closer family and family values, Hasidic values, or concept of a unique soul. Some of these, particularly the first four, are common to the Yehudia girls as well. Whatever the source, the freedom they feel that expresses itself as ruach is common to both spaces.

In the individual interview protocol, students were given a paragraph written by a graduate of the boys’ schools. I asked the girls, without a prompt, to respond to this paragraph. The purpose of this exercise, as discussed in the methodology section above, was as a “release point” (McClelland and Fine, 2008), one that drew on the work of Bronwyn Davies (1993). The paragraph can be found in Appendix A. It is about how status at the boys’ school was largely determined by how well one played basketball, but that after high school, this status marker no longer mattered.
On multiple occasions girls responded to this prompt by saying something like what Cindy shared, noting that basketball at the boys school, “is kind of like the ruach in Yehudia.” This quality of ruach as having status was also noted by a study on a single-gender, non-Jewish girls school: “Trickett et al. found that students in single-sex schools perceived their classes as having higher student involvement, higher academic orientation, more order, more organization, and more competition that students in coed schools” (Trickett, Trickett, Castro, & Schaffner, 1982, p.374-381).

In one way, the quality of ruach as outgoing or energetic does not fit the image of the ideal Yehudia girl, according to how the girls themselves interpret the school’s goals for them. In a conversation one day with Tova and Daniella, we discussed what this looked like:

Tova
Based on the administration, (the ideal girl) is someone who
wears very tznius (modest) clothes, and not like, not necessarily
with fashion, like, frumpy, \(^44\) I really think that’s their ideal

Daniella
Like a jean skirt and sweater

Tova
Like a jean skirt that’s like a little flared on the bottom, and like

Daniella
And a pull over

Tova
Yeah. Like that’s their ideal. And then, like hair in ponytail.
Like, looks presentable, but doesn't look like they tried too hard,
and then they spend hours studying. They have really high
grades, they’re a very good advocate for the school, and they,

\(^44\) A Yiddish word that describes someone who does not dress very well and is out of style. There is often the implication that this mode of dress is related to increased modesty.
The ideal girl does not stand out, and she is not noticed. They contrasted this to what the students themselves value:

**Tova**
From the kids’ point of view, okay, someone who likes to sing, someone who’s loud, someone who likes to eat, um, someone who dresses well but not too well.

**Daniella**
Their skirt just above their knee.

**Tova**
Yeah. Their skirt just above their knee. They wear the tight black skirts, um, they’re like in like the popular group, like you know.

On one hand, the administration values a girl who is studious, who does not make a strong outward or fashionable impression (the Yiddish word for this being ‘frumpy’), who is “tznius” or modest, and for whom being loud and noticed is not important. For the girls themselves, however, the ideal is someone who pushes the boundaries of modesty, both in terms of dress and in their behavior, and is thus someone who is noticed and attractive (even if not too attractive, as they note). This ideal girl is loud and likes to sing. In Malka’s words, “they are very spirited,” or as Rifki says, “it’s someone who’s

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45 Bnei Akiva is a Modern Orthodox, religious Zionist youth group
46 It is interesting that both here, and in at least two other conversations, girls included eating as part of what Yehudia girls ‘do’, given the issues with eating disorders at this age, and concerns with body image. In a conversation with Ms. Basser, she shared that when she was a Yehudia student, eating disorders were incredibly common, but that she does not think it is the case anymore. She could not account for why this was the case, but it makes the presence of eating as an identifying feature of girls at school more noteworthy.
like, always bubbly, there’s **ruach**, they’re always trying to get into things.” It is someone who gets noticed and makes an impression on those around her.

While not as overt as Samantha and Daniella’s rejection of Modern Orthodox feminine norms, these girls embrace of **ruach** as a status marker reveals aspects of a post-structural feminist project (Pomerantz, 2004), with the girls challenging the gender norms of their environment. While these may not be challenges that take up conventional feminist concerns, they nonetheless challenge Orthodox gendered expectations of modesty and inwardness by embracing **ruach** as a high value quality in their school. **Ruach** is a behavior that does not challenge the rules of the institution, but works within the accepted boundaries. As Rivki says above, **ruach** describes one who is “always trying to get into things, and make anything that’s like kind of not so fun, always finding the fun. Not in a bad way, not in a not educational way. In a way that’s like fun…” **Ruach** therefore both allows girls to challenge the system’s gender expectations of rule-following and passivity, but to do so from within and not without.

By following the ways in which gendered expectations help direct girls’ behavior, including religious behavior, one can achieve a deeper understanding of the girls’ lack of rebelliousness, despite their strong sense of autonomy and choice. These gendered norms help explain why it is that Modern Orthodox girls continue to follow religious expectations. It is a part of the girls’ self-understanding that they will follow the rules of the institution, and their related religious expectations. This is seen in how they contrast their experience to their perception of how boys act and are treated by the school. These expectations limit the degree to which their own strong sense of autonomy can allow them to act in defiance of their community’s gendered norms. Their autonomy is limited
by the culturally valued, and gendered, rule-following, and yet they use *ruach* as an outlet to these limitations. Some girls, like Daniella and Samantha, challenge these boundaries more openly, while others only let them lurk beneath the surface and not come out into the open.

5.3: *Expectations of Equality*

Before looking at the way Yehudia girls make sense of the inequalities in Modern Orthodox ritual life, it will be helpful to get a sense of the ways in which they experience inequality or expect equality in non-religious aspects of their social lives. I will explore two areas in this regard: expectations around work and professional opportunities, and male-female relationships. These will then be compared, in a further section, with how they view the need for (or lack of a need for) ritual equality, with an attempt to explain the apparent discrepancy between the two.

When asked to describe the trajectory of a Yehudia girl after high school, all informants first mentioned going to a religious seminary in Israel for a year, followed by an undergraduate degree at university. Marriage, a job and children were also included, but the timeline for these were different for each person. As Daniella said, “For Samantha, she’s not going to get married until she finished medical school. For me, I want to get married before I start medical school.” Professional ambitions were also common. Ayala said that by twenty-five, “I hope to have been married, well, still be married then. Hopefully I would have finished law school by then, be a lawyer. Have a family, like, 3, maximum 4 kids.”
The explanation for advanced professional degrees and employment, when discussed, also had a consistent rationale. The quotes below are from separate conversations, and I’ve highlighted the names for clarity.

Alana: I think you always want that option to work, like, I think it’s very important, like, to go to university, like, have that option and like, if you decide, like, you’re fine with just, like, I always think it’s important for me to stand on my own two feet, like, not to rely on someone else to, like, that, I just want to feel like an independent person, that like, makes their own money, that like, not that it has to be the best paid job, but just something that I really enjoy. (emphasis added)

Rachel: For sure. Job comes before everything. I would really prefer to have a stable job before I get married… I always want to know I can if I want to go to work, if I want to stay home I can. (emphasis added)

Esther: I’m hoping to be a lawyer, I see me having a full education, with a family also at some point. I don’t know the order of any of that. I see like me having a job, I don’t see me as being a stay at home mom. I don’t know if I just like to be doing my own thing. I see myself as being able to support my way of living, yet obviously you have a husband who can also.

Being able to work, for these girls, is about independence, or as Alana says, “standing on her own two feet,” even within the context of a supportive relationship and
family. This expectation seems part of a Western individualistic ethic of independence. The girls express a presumptive equality in the professional world and within their marriages. Women will have jobs that are not any different from those that men have, and they will not be limited by being women, let alone religious women.

Samantha was even more explicit than Alana. She said, “Boys are not always dependable. And you can’t depend on someone because, let’s say, something happens, then you need to depend on yourself. You can’t depend on somebody else. Now that girls can do whatever a boy can do, they should.” Beyond the value of independence for its own sake, girls must learn to be independent because boys (or anyone else for that matter) cannot be depended upon. Alana expresses a hearty belief that women can do whatever men can do professionally, which assumes a basic equity in professional life.

The predominance of this attitude, which may be surprising to some considering that girls still assume many socially traditional gender roles in Modern Orthodox society, and within a religious and ritual structure that remains patriarchal in many ways, has actually been observed in previous research. Harriet Hartman and Moshe Hartman, in *Gender and American Jews: Patterns in Work, Education and Family in Contemporary Life* (2009), found that Modern Orthodox women are more likely to have more professional equality with their husbands than women affiliated with the Conservative movement, which is much more egalitarian in ritual practice. Thus for these girls, men are not considered the family provider any more than they are, and they plan to contribute equally to earning. As Esther says, “I see myself as being able to support my way of living, yet obviously you have a husband who can also.”
Yet at the same time, many of the girls recognize that when it comes to raising children, they will play a primary role. Rachel seems to recognize this above when she says that what is important to her is the choice to be able to work or not, regardless of the outcome. However, it was more common for girls to see themselves on an advanced professional track, while also playing a more traditional family role. Shira sees herself as having some of both: “I definitely want to have a career. I don’t know if I’ll be working full time, but I’ll definitely be working.” Being a stay at home mom is not a serious option for her, but recognizing that she will be more involved in raising children, she places some limits on her professional goals.

Daniella and Samantha were openly dismissive of compromising one’s professional ambitions for the sake of family, as was shown earlier in their disdain for women who say they intend to “sacrifice” their career to support their family. As Samantha says, “Like, there was, I couldn’t like be an actual doctor, cause there wasn’t enough hours for me to be there for my kids, so I was a physicians assistant.”

For Samantha and Daniella, choosing a less demanding job when a more demanding one was desired is a sacrifice or compromise uniquely and unfairly asked of women. Women, for them, should not sacrifice the opportunities they have, even as they have family demands. As Daniella notes:

Why would you hold yourself back? Yeah, I think I’m going to work less overall cause I’m going to have children, I’m going to be home, but I’m still going to have a respectable job. I’m not going to, like, like, I think that I’m not saying anything bad about teachers, but I think a lot of women that become teachers just
do it because it’s an easy job to have kids with. And I’m not going to hold myself back from doing what I want to do just because I’m going to have a family.

While Daniella realizes that her working life will look different than her husband’s, it is a difference in degree, not kind. The presumption of professional equality and an opportunity and desire for independence exist equally for these girls, as does the expectation of their unequal family commitments. Whether or not this balance changes in the future, what it reveals here are a set of differing commitments to equality in different spheres of adult life.

These expectations of equality are not just professional, but relational as well. This fact came to the fore when I shared the selection of Talmud with the girls, about the wife who deceives her husband, a Rabbi, in order to sterilize herself and not have more children.

Rafi I’m curious, how much is different – do we live in a different world than this? If so, how?

Cindy I think it’s so different, cause women actually have a say now. Like, it’s not, men don’t control the women, women have just as much, not in everything, look at our school, between the boys and the girls school, but in most cases, you know, our relationship nowadays is between man and wife, and they decide things together. It’s like, the man says and that’s what goes, and the woman just sits and home and watches the kid, and then the man goes and learn. Nowadays most families, work, they have equal income, have equal say in kids, and like, so I feel like these
relationships are not like that.

Cindy understands that there has been a dramatic shift in the balance of marital relationships from patriarchal to egalitarian, even if certain roles may remain gender specific. Today, men and women both work and as such, contribute equally to the relationship and family. This not only changes roles within the family, but more importantly leads to an equal say in family decisions or power.

An expression of the expectation for equality in spousal relationships was that the girls in all three discussions were very bothered by Yehudit’s behavior, the wife in the story who sterilized herself against her husband’s wishes. Her being dishonest in the context of a committed relationship bothered the girls tremendously. The comments below were selected from various parts of conversations occurring on different days, but I share them together to convey a sense of the girls’ responses.

**Rivki:** I think it’s really selfish of her. Like, you consult with your husband. You’re a partnership. You don’t just do things.

**Bracha:** Yeah, I don’t think she should have just drank the potion without talking to him.

**Leah:** The biggest part that bothers me is the fact that she did it without speaking to him. It’s one thing if she, like, told him, like, I really don’t think it’s right that women don’t get the mitzvah, so I’m going to be drinking, but the fact that...they’re
supposed to be a couple, and when you’re married your honest with each other.

Like, this is just a huge thing to do behind another’s back.

The girls work with an assumption that there is equality and therefore presumed partnership in marital relationships. To act in one’s own interests without proper consultation and agreement is selfish, and a betrayal of the marital agreement. Because of this assumption, they were deeply bothered by the Yehudit’s actions. Daniella and Tova address a further (gendered) aspect of this issue:

Daniella: Yeah, but it’s her body, but when they got married they knew it would be a tool to have children.

Tova: That she doesn’t have full, cause it’s not just her body, it’s also Hashem’s. By her ruining her body, she’s affecting her husbands right to do a mitzvah or whatever.

Both Daniella and Samantha supported this view, even as Samantha vacillated and was sometimes more sympathetic to R. Hiyya’s wife’s decision. What makes their commitment to this kind of marital partnership interesting is their previously referenced view of men as not caring, being “jackasses” and not having a conscience, which is to say, acting in their own interest even when it hurts others, and the girls’ trying to model themselves on these behaviors. Of course, one could say that they are describing male behavior in the boys school context and describing a marital ideal here. However, the discrepancy between their strong advocacy for a marital norm they themselves might not see men as able to live up to, yet hold women accountable to, surfaces a tension between existing gender expectations in their community and the double standard they perpetuate despite an increased egalitarianism. In the context of gender, it is useful to note that I did not hear or come across any discussions about, let along challenges to, heteronormativity.
Rather than the sense of needing to have one’s partners consent for marital decisions, Tova and Daniella see the women’s body as an object that is the property of the marriage, and therefore not something about which a woman can even make her own decision. A woman like this becomes a docile subject of God/man/halacha.

As discussed earlier, Bronwyn Davies’ (1993) analysis of female narrative raises a related idea that may explain the girls’ approach. She says that, “women gain acceptability and perhaps some form of power through self-negation and concern for others” (p. 34). The girls’ critique of Yehudit, in light of Davies, is perhaps less about Yehudit’s failure to communicate in a relationship than a particular gendered expectation the girls have of her to get the agreement of her husband before making a decision about her body. While these girls frame this as a form of equality in a relationship, it strikes me that this is in fact a form of subservience to one’s spouse to grant this kind of power, and to deny it to the primary affected party, Yehudit. As she acted against the expectations the girls have of how women should behave, they are less sympathetic to Yehudit’s ‘selfish’ choice.

Even when the possibility was raised that Yehudit could likely not have achieved the ends she wanted by being honest with her husband, owing to the patriarchal conditions of the time, and that she could only have succeeded by acting surreptitiously, most girls were not dissuaded from their perception of her failure to be a proper marital partner. Bracha, below, describes the former idea, and Samantha the latter.

**Bracha:** I think a problem with women sometimes is that, like, we don’t necessarily have so much power. I think today we have power, but we like only got
freedom to vote a few years ago, and like, maybe women back then, like, maybe they also wanted freedom, and it was really really hard for them to speak out, because they were going to have babies, and you go and learn all day, like, maybe they didn’t want that. (Asked to repeat) Maybe women back then, the norm back then was, get married, have babies, and the men go to learn. And like, women didn’t really have rights. They were domestic housewives. Like, they didn’t have much to do, and some women, like Yehudit, they wanted more freedom, and they were afraid to approach their husband, cause husbands were scary, and that was just like the norm...

**Samantha:** So I don’t think she was standing up for women, because, if she’s really standing up, then she would have come up and approached her husband…

Samantha does not accept Bracha’s understanding that in the past that, where there was a different social arrangement, a woman may not have been able to have an open and honest relationship with her husband. Rather, “she would have come up and approached her husband,” if there was an issue to talk about, a statement that reflects Samantha’s contemporary understanding of how relationships operate. This is despite the understanding that relationships then were not equal, as had been articulated by Bracha, even if she does not accept the implications of this position. For Samantha, even in the absence of equality when it comes to power, she has an expectation that women will speak up for what they need, a position which goes to her own sense of self-empowerment vis a vis men.
This assumption about how martial relationships work is reflective of the girls’ very modern, non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal values.

Rafi: Is that (equality in marriage) a working assumption for you?
Daniella: Yeah.
Rafi: Is that the case here (in the story of R. Hiyya and his wife)?
Samantha: No. Cause it’s like the olden days.

The girls seem to hold Yehudit to a modern standard of relationship equality, despite the fact that she lived in a different era. This reflects the sense that, regardless of formal inequality, the relationship itself must operate in an open and honest fashion. This comes from Samantha’s own expectations, and challenge any social inequalities as they pertain to relationships where sociological norms where less conducive to women’s power and independence.

In this interaction I found myself in a strange place. While I used this piece of Talmudic text specifically to see how the girls’ would view Yehudit, I was expecting they would champion her decision to act on her own behalf. I had come to see the girls’ as so strong and independent, that I did not expect them to respond otherwise. What I discovered was similar to what Gonick (2001) encountered when she asked her female students to create a magazine that would give them the space to challenge their normative discourses of femininity, as noted above. Instead of supporting the rejection of male hegemony, Gonick’s students simply reproduced ‘conventional scripts.’ And yet, for her to push her liberatory feminism would mean suppressing their interests, even as their
interests reproduced dominant discourses. She thus wondered whether what she thought was right might not be ethically or politically right for them. She says that, “My experience working with girls leads me to suggest that, as feminists, we need to rethink our sense of certainty about having ‘gotten it right’ once and for all” (p. 169).

So far we have observed the girls’ presumptions of equality, equity, and power when it comes to work life and relationships. And yet, this strong expectation of equality that the girls express led to the corollary critique of, and often disdain for, Yehudit. The girls’ attitudes surrounding professional equality become even more interesting when viewed against their lack of interest in ritual equality within Judaism. I will now explore their acceptance of ritual inequality, and try to suggest an explanation as to why the girls do not experience these two parts of their lives as in tension.

5.4 Rejecting and reconstituting a Modern Orthodox feminism

In their research, Pomerantz (2004) and her research partners (Currie amongst them) explore the phenomenon of girls who reject the feminist label and its traditional agenda of political action and social change. These girls have often been labeled “postfeminist” and, “are frequently charged with enjoying all the freedoms won for them by the women’s movement without engaging in the struggle themselves.” (p. 547). Pomerantz et al. question whether these young women have indeed let feminism down, or whether they are expressing their feminism in a different way:

In the wake of these post/feminist discourses, we wonder if today’s girls really have let feminism down or if they have simply been ignored. There is little emphasis on the lives of “regular” girls and their practical experiences of the
Below I will explore both the girls’ explicit rejection of feminism, and the ways in which they enact a variety of covert feminist projects in ways that diverge from mainstream Modern Orthodox feminists.\textsuperscript{48} There is an important reason for this reconsideration, which Gonick raises. She suggests that feminists must come up with a variety of feminine discourses, even some that conform with conventional femininities, in order to best understand the feminism that young women are enacting. It is much the same here: the girls of Yehudia are not advocating for ritual equity, as Modern Orthodox feminists of a generation ago did, and which some of course continue to do – yet that should not prevent our seeing a feminism at work in their choices and actions.

It was not uncommon for the girls of Yehudia to explicitly reject the feminist label, as Samantha said, “But we’re not feminists. Trust me, we’re not feminists.” And yet, their choices and behavior are more complex than her outright rejection would imply. As Pomerantz et al (2004) note, it is not uncommon for girls to reject the feminist label, and do so based on a particular caricature of what constitutes a feminist.

Even in the 21st century, many girls continue to see feminists of the second wave as “man-hating, dungaree-wearing, hairy armpitted, butch dykes and ‘Plain Janes’

\textsuperscript{48} By ‘mainstream Orthodox feminists’ I am using JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, as my reference point. In their mission statement they say: “The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) is the leading organization advancing social change around gender issues in the Orthodox Jewish community. JOFA expands the spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for women within the framework of halakha (Jewish law), by advocating meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within halakha. The core JOFA belief is that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift the entire Jewish people.” (www.jofa.org, downloaded on January 26th, 2014). Note the emphasis on equality in ritual and halacha, with which the girls of Yehudia take issue.
angry at the world because they can’t get a man” (Nurka, 2002, p. 185).

(Pomerantz et al, 2004, p.548)

For the girls of Yehudia, a feminist is somewhat different, but still stereotyped and rejected.

Rachel I'm probably the opposite of a feminist.
Rafì What does it mean to be the opposite of a feminist?
Rachel I mean, my family’s never been one to want to read from the Torah, or,
I mean, my Mom’s perfectly fine with being an at home mom.

For Rachel, a feminist is someone who wants equality between men and women in religious practice, something I often heard these girls say is not something they want or need. Yet even as they reject ritual equality, social equity, in relationships and professionally, is presumed, as discussed above.

Rafì When you say, I’m going to get a job, I’m going to do what I want to do.
Samantha That’s not feminism.
Rafì That’s always been feminism.
Samantha Well it’s not.

Feminism for many of these young women is not about social equality, which appears to them as normative, and therefore requires no ‘feminist’ (i.e. challenging or rejectionist) agenda. They are thus safe to reject the label.
Rachel makes a similar claim in a later part of the conversation above, which focuses on choice, rather than equality. Only when portrayed as equality, ritual or social, is feminism rejected, in favor of the more dominant desire for choice.

Rafi

What does it mean to not be a feminist?

Rachel

To not feel like I have to do the same jobs as men do, or…

Rafi

So feminism means being the same as men?

Rachel

Yeah, I would say so. I mean, that’s what I’m getting from this school. The sense that I’m getting is that there are people in this school that are more feminist.

Rafi

Teachers or students?

Rachel

Students more.

Rafi

And what do they do that identifies them as feminists?

Rachel

Well, like when it comes to talks about like marriage and work, then they’ll be the ones who get up in class and say, why can’t I be the one working, why can’t my husband be the one cooking at home. Which I agree with, I don’t think that’s a fair stereotype that a woman has to be in the house. But at the same I don’t feel that if I want to be in the house, it should be fine.

Rachel’s rejection of feminism is a rejection of the expectation to live one’s life in a particular type of way, which is to say, to do what men have traditionally done. This applies to things ritual (“My family’s never been one to want to read from the Torah”),
and as relates to work ("my Mom’s perfectly fine with being an at home mom"). Feminists, for Rachel, expect things to be the same, but for her, as for Samantha and Daniella, it is about choice.

The message that equality is the goal is one Sarah feels comes from the school. In my interview protocol, one of the ‘release points’ I used was to ask obvious questions. One of these was, ‘Why do boys study Talmud?’ Most did not know the answer to the question (a curiosity which I will explore later in my analysis of this question), but what followed was often illuminating. Sarah’s response helps make sense of Rachel’s observation above:

Rafi: Do you know why boys learn gemara?

Sarah: I have no idea. I just think they do because men are generally learning gemara all the time. Not all the time. Also cause I guess I guess, I don’t know if the school’s trying to prove a point, but most girls’ schools don’t teach gemara.

Rafi: Why?

Sarah: I guess the whole thing in the gemara about how girls should and girls shouldn’t and blah blah blah and how they’re less important, and all these things, and I feel like Yehudia’s just trying to prove a point that we can.

Sarah knows that learning gemara (another word for Talmud) is a male thing. Talmud studies at Yehudia, which is perceived as not nearly as intense or serious as at the boys’
school, leaves Sarah with the impression that her learning is not about the importance of the subject itself, but the point it makes about egalitarianism in Modern Orthodox life, thus making it part of the school’s hidden curriculum. This leaves students like Rachel with the feeling that feminism is about formal equality in religious life, instead of about choice, and she thus rejects the feminist label. But in the specific case of Talmud, it makes a religious subject into a social issue of egalitarianism, that by teaching gemara they are “just trying to prove a point…” that girls are not less important than boys. This is not to say that it does not have a religious impact as well, rather that what the girls notice about their being exposed to Talmud also has gender and value (i.e. egalitarianism) implications.

5.5 Orthodox feminism: Separate-but-equal

Why are these girls not bothered by the inequality in their ritual Jewish life? In a conversation with Samantha and Daniella one afternoon, I heard something similar to Rachel’s comment that doing the job you want is not feminism. I shared my observation with them that the girls at Yehudia seemed very self-empowered, and wondered about whether this influenced their religious choices or not. This is a very rich text that I have divided into three parts for the sake of clarity as I reference each part in my discussion below:

Part 1
Daniella: Not getting an *aliyah* \(^{49}\) - I don’t even think about that even, I don’t even think about it, oh I want to be the person who gets an *aliyah*.

Rafi: Why does it bother some women so much?

Daniella: Cause they’re feminists.

Rafi: And you’re *not* feminists? (emphasis in tone)

Samantha: No.

Daniella: Not at all.

Samantha: No but like, yes, I know that on Shabbos I’m going to be the one that that kind of cooks the meals, and, if I ever learn how to cook, sets the table. And like, I’ll be the one like, I don’t know, yeah, that will be the motherly figure, and my husband is probably going to go to *shul*\(^{50}\) every single day and I’m going to go to *shul* most days. It’s going to be like normal, whatever, but I’m still going to have a job, like, having a job, making money, that’s not like something to be looked down upon. That’s something that’s good. It’s not something to be looked down upon.

Daniella: I don’t feel the need to have an *aliyah*, like I don’t feel like I want…

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\(^{49}\) An ‘*aliyah*’ literally means ascension, which refers to going up to read from the Torah in front of the whole congregation during communal prayer. In Orthodox synagogues, this is something only men can do, and including women is one of the changes made in non-Orthodox synagogues meant to achieve gender equality.

\(^{50}\) Synagogue
Samantha Because God said that men should have *aliyah*, God said that men should do this, God never said only men should have jobs. There is a difference between like what we do for religion and what we do to live, you know. What we do just to live is just because we’re doing it just because we’re doing it to make a living, just doing it because it’s part of our life.

Daniella So many things that you just pick up by society that doesn’t go against religion but like it just.…

Part 3

Daniella Yeah. When I sit in *shul* on Shabbos, like at the (name of local Modern Orthodox synagogue), and I’m sitting upstairs, not next to the *aron*\(^{51}\), not next to the *bima*, I’m not allowed to be a *chazen*, I’m not allowed to have an *aliyah*, like, I don’t think about that.

Samantha I’m not like, darn those men.

Daniella Yeah, it’s not what I’m thinking about. I’m just thinking about, okay, I’m in *shul* now, I’m gonna *daven*.

Samantha Like when my brother’s, when our brother’s *duchen*, our father’s *duchen*, like, we like to listen to them, we’re not like, uch.

In Part 1 and Part 3, Daniella associates feminism with a woman’s desire for ritual

\(^{51}\) The *aron* is the ark where the Torah scrolls are stored. The *bima* is the table upon which the Torah is read in a synagogue; the *chazen* is the man who leads the service; to ‘daven’ is to pray in Yiddish; and to *duchen* is when the *kohen*, someone descended from a priestly family, goes up to bless the entire congregation, also something only men do.
equality. If men can read from the Torah, then women should be able to read from the Torah. If men can lead the service, women should be able to lead the service. This demand for equality was clearly articulated in Blu Greenberg’s groundbreaking 1981 book *On Women and Judaism* (1981), an analysis and polemic about feminism in Orthodoxy, and has subsequently become a more normative part of Modern Orthodox feminist discourse. But these girls are not interested in halachic parity – “I don’t even think about it,” one noted. They are content with their religious position, and generally do not envy what males are able to do in the religious sphere. These opportunities are not felt to be missing outlets for their religious expression, nor do they feel that by not having them they are second-class citizens in religious life. It is a non-issue.

Rafi: What about religion? Has religion accepted you?
Samantha: Yes.
Daniella: Yes.
Samantha: It’s never not accepted us. There’s just different rules for men and for women. And yes, because men have more rules, it doesn’t mean we should start complaining. Like, I’d like not to have so many rules, thank you for the opportunity God.

These girls see themselves as having different ritual roles, a separate-but-equal ethos than is not uncommon in Orthodoxy. This is similar to the way that Mahmood’s

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52 Tamar Ross on feminism and halachic change in the Orthodox world (2004), Broyde on women becoming Rabbis in the Orthodox world (2011), and Yehudah Henkin’s book (2003) on women and halacha as some examples amongst many others.
women see their roles as different from men’s, but do not see the difference as problematic, even as they understand and know what the ‘modern’ alternative looks like. However, for these girls, unlike Mahmood’s women, social equality is normative, and inequality in the social realm is entirely unacceptable. As such, the separate-but-equal notion only operates in the ritual sphere because the differential lacks a noticeable implication, as power is not exercised through the adoption of ritual equality.\(^{53}\) Samantha says she will work and make money, just like her husband: “I’m going to be like, normal, whatever, but I’m still going to have a job, like, having a job, making money, that’s not like something to be looked down upon. That’s something good. It’s not something to be looked down upon.” In the first sentence, Samantha affirms that she will be “normal” even though she will have a job. By this she seems to imply, in contrast to her previous thought, that she will be normal for a religious woman, and despite this, she will also have a job. She also feels the need to repeat that social and professional equality is something that one should not look down on, that it is something good. This seems to be in contrast with the ‘normalcy’ of Modern Orthodox Jewish femininity where the separate-but-equal equation operates, and her continued repetitions of social and professional equality being “good” seem to betray a lack of confidence in social equality being entirely acceptable. And yet what she says in the second part of Part 1 does not fit with this notion. Samantha recognizes and accepts that she will play a traditional woman’s role in the home. She will be the “motherly figure” who cooks while her

\(^{53}\) Although this is quite firmly in the realm of speculation, one wonders whether Modern Orthodoxy as a whole has downgraded the (Orthodox) value of ritual as a way to cope with the (Modern) value of women’s equality. Since normative halacha does not allow for formal equality, one could suggest that the alternative they have adopted has lessened the significance of ritual, preventing the ritual distinctions between men and women from challenging the system as a whole.
husband goes to *shul*. In this way, the social expectation of equality in Modern Orthodoxy and the religious understanding of separate-but-equal enter a gray zone, where traditional gender norms partially operate.

Would it perhaps make more sense to simply say that Samantha and Daniella are exhibiting false-consciousness? That they don’t really understand the implications of the continued gender inequality in traditional Judaism, or that there are detrimental effects that accrue to them as a result? A comment by Samantha from another conversation will more deeply reveal the tension in this liminal social-religious space. Earlier, unhappy with the models being presented at an all-women’s panel on balancing work and home life, Samantha said, “I don’t have to be the classic woman.” Samantha’s strong sense of autonomy operates in a complex fashion. On one hand, in the selection above, she uses the traditional religious separate-but-equal differences to hold off the greater expectations of ritual male Jewish life (“Like, I’d like not to have so many rules, thank you for the opportunity God.”), and on the other, she rejects the social norms of Jewish family life and motherhood that would limit her career when she says, “I don’t have to be the classic woman.”. And yet as seen in Part 1, she understands the likelihood that she will play a traditional role in the home, despite it being her choice not to.

In such a construction I would argue that Samantha uses her autonomy in both religious and non-religious areas to achieve ends that she wants, and uses the socially constructed rules in each culture to do so. Even though in the case of religion this appears to leave her with only traditional female roles and responsibilities, and subsumed within a structure of patriarchy, in reality it is quite the opposite. She does not want the burdens of traditional male ritual, and so maintains a separate-but-equal justification for
the inequality of traditional Judaism. She also wants a fulfilling profession, not one limited by the social norms of motherhood or traditional Jewish life, and so here she pushes back against the women who entered such a compromise. In both cases she has used the existing social structures to achieve the ends she desires, thus exercising her own agency. Thus, the agency and autonomy found in modern culture do not change the surface of what religious practice looks like for Modern Orthodox men and women for Daniella and Samantha, but profoundly changes the reason for that practice and what motivates it. The inequality in ritual Judaism that originated as a patriarchy structure has ended, at least for Daniella and Samantha, as one that has made room for autonomy. They have used the system to achieve their own ends – keeping the demands of ritual at bay without having to reject the expectations of Modern Orthodox Jewish life. To some degree this represents the bifurcation commonly described as normative in Modern Orthodoxy (Cohen and Heilman 1989; Liebman, 1979), and yet it is not a strict bifurcation, since autonomy is used in each realm to achieve ends that benefit the subject.

Later in the conversation in Part 2, Samantha explains this approach by making an important distinction that underlies her approach. She says that men are the only ones who have specific ritual expectations, “Because God said that men should have aliya, God said that men should do this, God never said only men should have jobs. There is a difference between like what we do for religion and what we do to live, you know.” First to note is her distinction between what is done for religion and what is done to live. In traditional religious societies there is no such distinction (Berman, 2008), such that religious expectation is all encompassing. For Samantha, religious expectations occupy one sphere, which play by different rules than the other parts of her life. This prevents the
rules of one domain from impinging upon and calling into question the rules of another domain. It explains why Samantha need not be bothered by religious inequality but can be bothered by workplace inequality, and also helps make sense of why a young woman with such a strong sense of self-efficacy and autonomy would not appear to be interested in actualizing that autonomy in a religious sphere. In fact, she is operating according to the rules that exist in each sphere. Were she to encounter inequity in the social or work sphere, her response would not be as disinterested as it is for religious matters, just as she objects to the intrusion of feminism into Orthodox ritual life.

We can further relate Samantha’s attitude to a different part of this study that explores the way in which Modern Orthodox girls view religious texts. Samantha says, “God never said only men should have jobs,” even as she understands Him to have said that only men should get an aliyah (as traditional halacha does dictate). The distinction seems to be based on an acceptance of God’s command: where He has a particular and explicit expectation, gender difference cannot be considered immoral inequality. Where God has not said anything, like about whether women can hold jobs, equality must be the norm. For her, gender difference in religious matters is not cultural or institutionalized, but divine. As such, it is not changeable, and moreover, to demand such change is to be a feminist, and reject God’s command. Daniella starts to develop this idea when she begins to respond, “So many things that you just pick up by society that doesn’t go against

54 What would have been interesting to explore in retrospect is the distinction I discuss below, about what is viewed as Divine and therefore unchanging and obligated, and what is viewed as human and therefore malleable and flexible. While the girls understand having an aliyah as a Divine command, it is in fact Rabbinic in origin, and based, according to many, on social conventions (see Rabbi Henkin for a list of sources and discussion - http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/1_2_henkin.pdf). One wonders if the girls understood this, whether they would have had the same response, or been less accepting of their exclusion.
religion but like it just…” where she tails off and does not complete her thought. What she seems to imply by “society,” is that there are non-Jewish or at least non-Orthodox norms that, without explicit reason for rejection, should be accepted. That is to say that all is acceptable if it is not forbidden by the Divine explicitly.

The logic of separate-but-equal is one that is often used by traditionalists (as in Rabbi Shemesh’s class) to retain the boundary between male and female religious expectations. By demonstrating the special value of women in modern religious life, it reinforces the patriarchal underpinnings of traditional Judaism, i.e. women are not excluded because they are inferior in some way, but because they are superior and do not need the ‘extra’ obligations men have been assigned. In another part of the conversation and quoted above, Samantha said: “There’s just different rules for men and for women. And yes because men have more rules, it doesn’t mean we should start complaining. Like, I’d like not to have so many rules, thank you for the opportunity God.” First, Samantha re-inscribes the separate but equal standard – there are simply different rules for men and women, and, as noted above, since they come from God, this is just fine. But her closing reveals another level at work. As an autonomous woman who believes that, unless it’s forbidden by God it should be allowed, and for whom authority would only limit what is acceptable, having fewer rules is better, not worse. Thus, “thank you for the opportunity God” of having less to do rather than more. The feminism she rejects is not simply about wanting something that is not hers. It’s a feminism that for her is about wanting something unwanted – the extra burden of men’s religious ritual life. Samantha exercises her autonomy not by participating equally in men’s religious rituals, but instead by preventing the incursion of those rituals into her female space. She reconstructs the
separate-but-equal doctrine of traditional Judaism, which is usually used to prevent
women from wanting to participate in normatively male religious behaviors, to instead
prevent the logic of equality and egalitarianism from putting the extra burden of male
religious ritual on her plate. In this sense she is exercising a feminist project (a la Currie)
by determining the boundary of her own religious practice instead of following the value
of egalitarianism to its logical conclusion in the religious sphere.

Before considering two other ways in which the separate-but-equal concept is
used, I want to explore one more layer in the tension beneath the surface of Samantha’s
approach. One of the classes I commonly sat in on was that of Mrs. Unger. She is a
young woman in her early thirties from an Israeli-American background, with whom the
girls had an open and warm relationship. She taught a halacha class to the entire grade,
which, aside from Jewish philosophy, was the only class in which all girls were together
at one time. Samantha found her approach apologetic, and described it as follows:

Who were all the chachamim⁵⁵? Who were all the chachamim? Only men. Like
that’s why. Like Morah (teacher) Unger was trying to argue with us, because she
also thinks, she’s some sort of feminist as well. She’s like, yeah, she’s like yeah,
there’s so many mefarshim (commentators on the Bible) that talk about how great
these women are, and whatever, and Daniella’s like, who wrote these mefarshim.
(all laugh). Men!

Here feminist is defined as someone who tries to read the Jewish tradition as placing a
unique value on women, an approach that Samantha sees as disingenuous. When Mrs.
Unger tallies the different places where the tradition does value women, Daniella points

⁵⁵ Sages of the Oral Torah (Mishna and Talmud, circa 0-500 CE)
out the irony in such statements – they were all made by men! Women have always been excluded from the processes of learning and religious authority, so that even where they are explicitly valued, one cannot read with the lens of egalitarianism. To pretend it is otherwise, the girls say quite derisively, is to be a feminist. The tradition is inescapably masculine – it is from God and His male interpreters.

This skepticism fits with Samantha’s re-working of the separate-but-equal concept. The tradition has formed itself by and around men, and she is happy with the limited expectations placed on women in traditional Judaism as a result (“I’d like not to have so many rules, thank you for the opportunity God.”). It gives her the space to do other things, and not be burdened by increased expectations. It may be that were she to accept the feminism implicit in her expectation of social equality, it would mean that these expectations would impinge on her desire for autonomy in other realms. While this further consequence is speculative, what is clear is a willingness to be honest about the male impact on Jewish practice, and the resultant exclusion of women from this realm.

One could still suggest that Samantha is engaging in a post-facto justification of her inability to engage in male-only ritual activities. What points away from this direction are not only the above reference quotations, but perhaps more explicitly from her willingness to challenge Rabbi Shemesh’s apologetic explanation of a women’s exclusion from ritual life. She is not only willing to challenge the separate-but-equal doctrine, nor, given the chance, use it to support a set of ritual practices that she already accepts, but she also does not take her own argument to its natural conclusion and ask for more ritual performance for women. This seems to imply that while she views women as equal to men, that it still does not result in her desire for equal ritual treatment.
Rivki has adopted the separate-but-equal approach, and it is worthwhile to see how differently it operates in her world than in Samantha’s:

For me, certain things are clear, like certain things men are supposed to do and women aren’t. To me *tefillin* (phylacteries), men putting on *tefillin*, in my opinion, is clearly more halachic than questioning, there’s no fence or *geder*,\(^56\) like, men put on *tefillin*, why would I do that? God didn’t tell me to, doesn’t want me to, I don't know if that’s the right word, but like, I’m not supposed to. That’s a man’s job, and that’s fine, I have other things I should do. And like, I find what I, this is one thing I do, this is one thing I think. If women are going and they’re learning, and they’re doing literally everything to their level, they’re filling all the things required of them. They’re learning, and they’re reaching this level and they want more, they feel sort of lacking and they want more. They’re not learning properly. I can understand why they would feel that they want to do more, they want to be able to *leyn*,\(^57\) they want to be able to do something because they’ve done everything they can and men still get more. That’s one thing. But women who do this, I know at least in my (Modern Orthodox) *shul* (which she names). Women want to *leyn*, and there’s all this stuff going on, all these women I know are barely even religious, in the sense that they’re technically Modern Orthodox, they keep

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\(^{56}\) *Geder* is the Hebrew word for fence. It is used in *halacha* to refer to Rabbinic laws that were created in order to distance practitioners from transgressing biblical laws. For example, one cannot write on the Sabbath, but one could, biblically, pick up a pencil to move it. Rabbinic law created a *geder* or fence around the Sabbath laws to prohibit even picking up a pencil. For Rivki here, *tefillin* being biblical and not Rabbinic means that it is not subject to change or critique, which would not have been the case were it ‘only’ a Rabbinic law or *geder*, in which case it would be subject to both possible change and critique.

\(^{57}\) Read from the Torah scroll publicly in the synagogue, something which, in Orthodox synagogues, only men do.
Shabbos and they keep kosher, and they keep almost everything. Some of them send their kids to (a local community day school), I find that to be pretty religious, and still, they want to go leyn, they’re not even keeping what God has asked them to do sometimes. That kind of thing doesn’t make sense to me. So personally, since I don’t feel that I’ve done everything that I could, and like I don’t think anyone can ever really feel that way, I don’t, I feel like there’s still a lot more that I can do within, I don’t want to say my limits, within my expectations, there’s so much more I know I can still do that like I don’t feel a need, the need to fill this void, to take more when I haven’t even done anything. So that’s on more of a personal level. As far as halacha goes, I don’t know the halacha, but it doesn’t seem like kind of the right thing. It hasn’t been done, it hasn’t…I think we’re just very different. The roles that are expected are just very different. I feel like its one of those things that you can’t compare, it’s like when people say between science and like English, that like no, science and physics, we were having this conversation me and Leah yesterday, like, physics is a lot of math, bio is a lot of memorizing. You can’t compare the difficulty which is harder, you can’t say which is more important, which is this, they’re just completely different roles. It may seem to me like they’re doing more, but in Hashem’s eyes, what I’m doing is already so much more to Him than like I even knew.

For Rivki, as for Samantha, there are separate-but-equal roles in traditional Judaism for men and women, yet this truth is held from a significantly different perspective. As noted above, Samantha is content to not have more on her religious plate. Rivki, on the other
hand, feels that women’s existing spiritual expectations are more than enough, but not that she does not want more. God judges the quality of people’s religious experience, not its quantity. She puts the burden on herself (or the women she observes) to fully fulfill their existing requirements before challenging the inequity of halacha. It does not matter to her that men have more commandments to fulfill than women – the quality of observance is all that matters. She feels that she has much more she can do within the obligations she already has. This claim is buttressed by the fact that such change has never been accomplished within the bounds of halacha, and therefore does not seem “right.” While this is clearly a secondary reason, and is less important than her separate-but-equal rationale, it does act as a support for her claim that women should not be doing men’s mitzvot. Where Samantha and Rivki diverge is in what they do with the separate-but-equal concept. For Rivki, who uses it in its more ‘traditional’ context, it is used to justify her own more minimal religious expectations and view what she is asked to do with greater depth. For Samantha it is used to fend off further expectation of religious practice in order to retain the personal space that she is afforded by having fewer ritual obligations. Samantha has thus turned the argument on its head in order to protect her own autonomy, and exercises a degree of control of her own religious life.

Yet even for Rivki, there is an assumption of total equality between men and women in the social realm, as with Samantha and Daniella:

Bnei Akiva where we’re roshim (leaders) and madrichot (counselors), and we work, we’re co-ed, we work with boys, it’s not like they’re given a high position, I don’t feel like I’m less, I think what my opinion, what I have to say, even if it
were in a discussion, we have *shabbatons*,\(^{58}\) we have discussions, it’s not like we’re heard just as much. We learn *gemara*, do you know what I mean?... I don’t feel that in our community men are made to seem stronger, bigger, or like, more important than women.

Even for Rivki, who had expressed comfort with a separate-but-equal paradigm that could easily be viewed as patriarchal, this distinction disappears in the social realm, even in the religious social space. Here there is the perception of genuine equality (and expectation of equality) between males and females, both in her personal interactions and in the communal norms.

It is noteworthy that none of the young women above, neither during interviews nor class discussions, expressed any real feeling of conflict between their social and religious views. For those above, separate-but-equal operates in their religious lives in a way that is acceptable, and there is basic gender equality in their social lives. A notable and explicit exception was Shira.

*Shira* (The inequality in religious life) bothers me, definitely, because I don’t understand it. I don’t understand why it should be that way.

*Rafi* But you don’t do anything about it.

*Shira* It’s something I have to think about, because I have to come to terms with it. Because it does bother me. It doesn’t go with what I believe. But at the same time, like, it’s things about *halacha* and who am I to question what God says.

Shira’s conflict is between her own belief in egalitarianism, its absence in Jewish life, and

\(^{58}\) From the word Shabbat, a frequent event at which people gather together for an entire Shabbat together, often away from home at a hotel or in another city.
what such a question ought to mean when she believes that it is God who has imposed the inequality in the first place. The separate-but-equal position where equal value between genders is still implied even as obligations differ (like Rivki) does not seem to suffice for Shira, nor the position that having limited obligations benefits women practically (like Samantha). For Shira there is a genuine contradiction between cultural discourses - something often assumed to be the case in modern religious life (Lehmann, 2007; 2008) - but startlingly lacking at Yehudia. And even Shira, who sees this conflict, accepts the separate-but-equal formula:

The way I see it, boys have their mitzvahs and we have ours. They are not trying to get our mitzvot, why should we try to get theirs? Like, I mean we do have our own mitzvahs, and like it’s like some put themselves down by wanting what they don’t have. I don’t like it.

In this construction of the separate-but-equal argument, women are degraded when they try to do men’s mitzvot. The power of this argument, however, only goes so far, as will become clear when placed in contrast with the next quote. It is satisfying for Shira when it comes to certain mitzvot, those that are between a person and God, like mitzvot in a synagogue or ritual acts. It is, however, more problematic when it comes to interpersonal and social mitzvot.

I feel like (the laws of) inheritance as something that was okay for the time it was done.\textsuperscript{59} Women weren’t going to get the inheritance anyways. So no one was going to question it. It was really fine. Things really have changed. But, first of all there’s the whole issue that it’s not only the man who works, and also, it’s not

\textsuperscript{59} In the biblical laws of inheritance, a woman cannot inherit from her father – only males can inherit.
only the man who needs money. So it’s not just as applicable. Modern values challenge the basic biblical assumptions of inequality, but only within a circumscribed social sphere does the value of equality have an impact on Shira’s religious worldview. The result is a profound tension between social and religious norms with no clearly articulated solution. However, in the realm of the strictly ritualistic, regarding obligations between a person and God, egalitarianism is not operative. Traditional patriarchal Judaism, recast in the spirit of separate-but-equal, is for Shira more than an acceptable apologetic. An egalitarian reading is dismissed as a rejection of womanhood itself: “like it’s like some put themselves down by wanting what they don’t have.”

5.6: Learning Talmud

The Talmud is the basis of Rabbinic Judaism. It is primarily a book of legal discussions, but its multifarious contents are not limited to the legal realm. It is replete with biblical commentary, dream interpretation, medical advice, rabbinic biography, morality tales and much more (Halbertal and Halbertal, 1998). For nearly all of its history, it has been men who have studied and commented on the Talmud’s words. As a result, the legal system of modern Jewish life has evolved through the discussions of men (Irshai, 2012). This is the case even for laws pertaining to women’s issues like menstruation and birthing. In part, this was simply an effect of the normative patriarchal social structures in which Jews found themselves. However, patriarchy also became more deeply institutionalized due to an argument in the Talmud about whether women should be taught it or not. Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying, “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah [it is as if] he is
teaching her *tiflut* (immorality or triviality)” (Talmud Sotah 20a). While there is much
discussion about what the word *tiflut* means, how far it should extend, and whether the
*halacha* accords to R. Eliezer or not, the simple meaning appears to be against teaching
women the oral law (i.e. Mishnah and Tamud). Indeed, in most parts of the traditional
Jewish world before the twentieth century, women were precluded from serious textual
study.

The situation changed in the twentieth century, when women learning Jewish
texts became more and more common (Gorsetman & Sztokman, 2013). The practice
became a marker of modern status, a litmus test of one’s commitment to egalitarianism
and full participation for women in modern Jewish life. For many girls at Yehudia, this
continues to be the case. Talmud functions as a social marker of gender equality, as the
girls themselves observed. However, some girls also observe that what they learn and
how much they learn differs from their male counterparts, and see this as a point of
gender disparity. In contrast to Yehudia, where the girls learn Talmud for three periods
per week, the boys have a ‘Gemara Rebbe,’ or Talmud teacher, who is their core teacher,
is with them for two to three periods per day. This time limitation makes it challenging
for girls to become fluent Talmudic learners, and is also indicative of an imbalance in the
value placed upon Talmud in each branch of school.

Ms. Basser, a teacher and Yehudia graduate, shared with me that it was only in
the last ten years or so that Talmud became a part of the curriculum at Yehudia. Leah
notes something of this change:

…in the olden times, like, women, like didn’t have, like occupations, and like, so
this (Talmud) doesn’t apply to them, like, these are the more important people.
And like now I think that that’s all changing. Now, like, I just heard this, I don’t know if I agree with it, or whatever, but that that, girls are becoming more important, so like, why not, like, it’s more like a feminist approach, like, why can’t they learn it?

Leah sees a relationship between Talmud learning and social status, observing that women’s status has changed over time. Rather than proposing that there is a direct relationship between occupation and Talmud-learning (unless one becomes a Rabbi or a religious teacher), the connection she draws implies that she relates both areas of advancement to a general change in social status for women. That being said, the fact that women today have higher social standing is something that she is hesitant to agree with, possibly since it feels like a ‘feminist approach’.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that Leah does not articulate a halachic reasoning for or against women’s learning. Rather she contextualizes it as a social question, and decided on social grounds. It may have been because it was something she simply took for granted, similar to the other ways in which other girls described their curriculum as fundamentally the same as the boys’ curriculum. Some of the girls seem to assume that just as they learn the same science, math or English as the boys, so too their Talmud, Torah and halacha classes are just like the boys’. For Leah, it was simply another subject to them and nothing more.

For Leah, because women have gone from being less important to more important, they should also go from not learning, to learning Talmud. She says, as referenced earlier, that, “I guess the whole thing in the gemara about how girls should and girls shouldn’t and blah blah blah and how they’re less important, and all these
things, and I feel like Yehudia’s just trying to prove a point that we can.” Now that there is social parity, women should have access to Talmud as well. She recognizes that there is a halachic argument (“about how girls should and shouldn’t”), but she does not take it that seriously (“blah blah blah”). It seems she has moved beyond the halachik argument. Parity is the accepted norm. Moreover, she sees the school’s choice to teach women Talmud as ultimately related to the social (“how they’re less important”), intended to prove gender parity, and not, presumably, because it is of real value to young women. This fits with the observation above that distinguishes between social and ritual Jewish practice. Just as the ritual value of an act has little impact on a feeling of inequality, so too the halachic or legal status of Talmudic learning is less significant than its social implication, which is to say, the way in which it demonstrates social parity and gives value to women.

As noted, I used the question, “Why do boys study Talmud?” in my interview protocol as one of Fine and MacLand’s ‘release points’ – an apparently obvious question that forces the subject to express with greater reflection what they take for granted (2008). In doing so with the girls of Yehudia, I got three answers of three different sorts, all of which shed greater light on the girls’ understanding of gender in Modern Orthodox Jewish life.

Before discussing the different answers, it is interesting to note that the first response of almost every girl was some version of, “I don’t know,” to quote Ayala, who tautologically explains herself as follows, “they’re expected to do it just because they have to do it.” Here is what Rachel said:

    Rafi    Why do boys study Talmud?
Rachel: I don't know. It’s part of the curriculum. And I guess it’s known to be what Jewish boys do.

Rafi: But you know why it’s what Jewish boys do?

Rachel: Not a clue.

It was not clear why they did not know. They understood that Talmud was something more closely associated with boys than with girls, but not why. Quite a number of girls could not get beyond this answer. It did not seem that their own learning of Talmud contributed to an understanding of why it should be something that boys do differently than girls.

Some, however, were able to articulate more complex responses. Alana understood that since the subjects of the Talmud are men, it is not as relevant to women:

Maybe it’s because there’s never like a woman in the Talmud. There’s never like two women discussing things. It’s always, like, Rabbis, so they think maybe it applies more to boys because it’s like, it’s the boys’ mindset, it’s always the boys’ opinion, so like, why not?

From the fact that there are only men speaking in the Talmud, Alana infers that it is more relevant to boys. Women are not part of the conversation, so the contents must apply more to boys than to girls. Interestingly, she takes this to a deeper level. Not only are the discussants male, and so discuss male experiences, but they the text itself reflects a male mindset. She fleshes this out later in our conversation when she reflects on a class I observed, where the girls learned about shomer negiah (laws forbidding touch between sexes). In that selection of the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva, one of the most prominent
Talmudic sages, is described as having almost lost control in his desire for a woman he
was not married to. Rabbi Shemesh taught this piece of Talmudic text in order to show
the girls that men have sexual desires that women cannot even imagine, and that the laws
of negiah are therefore necessary. This approach was intended both to explain the
underlying rationale for the laws of negiah, and also create an awareness amongst the
girls about what men are ‘really’ like. About this Alana said,

Yeah, like even that whole thing that we just learned about shomer negiah, and
like, how like they can control themselves. For us, like, we can’t, I don't know,
personally, like yetzer (desire) whatever, like like oh my God I had to like yell out
for help cause I couldn’t control myself. I just think like, what are they talking
about??

I confirmed with Rabbi Shemesh (personal communication, December 7, 2013) that he
had presented this piece of text in order to make clear how powerful the male desire for
sex is, a fact which in turn functions as a rationale for the laws of negiah. Yet the
message Alana walked away with was how foreign the Talmudic text was from her
experience as a woman. Her understanding of desire did not conform to the model with
which she was being presented. It seems that Rabbi Shemesh understood this, and this
was his rationale for teaching it. However, he likely did not anticipate that the
consequence of this would be their seeing the text as foreign.

This is another example of the workings of the hidden curriculum at Yehudia.
Rabbi Shemesh, in his attempt to offer a rationale for a religious practice that is
challenging for the girls, uses a text that, from Alana’s point of view, puts the source of
that tradition at even greater distance from the girls themselves. Safer (2003) asks how
girls construct religious identities when their access to particular texts is determined by gender. In her research site, which was not Modern Orthodox, but of a more enclavist Orthodoxy, girls did not learn Talmud. Her interest was in how the girls’ religious identities were formed through the texts chosen in that environment, meant to inform a particular kind of Orthodox femininity. At Yehudia, where the girls are being taught Talmud as the boys are, a choice which coincides with Modern Orthodoxy’s push to social parity, they question the relevance of those texts as part of their religious identity formation. Teaching Talmud thus has the opposite effect of creating parity, by making it seem to the girls that the texts themselves are irrelevant to their lives.

Leah, however, sees another dimension in this Talmud passage on man’s overwhelming sexual desire. It brings her to see the distance between her understanding of the world and that of the Rabbis.

As much as they’re learning it, I feel that like with the gemara, there’s always, just now that I’m thinking about it, there’s always this little invisible barrier between us and the gemara. We can understand it, we can see it, but we don’t completely get it, because we don’t think like boys, we’re not like that. It’s like when they were saying, like, there was some gemara with like boys’ minds’, like, we don’t completely understand. We’ll try to understand, we’ll understand to our fullest, as much as we’re capable of understanding. But it’s always a little bit distant, cause we don’t think like those rabbis.

For these girls, Talmud is not off limits or forbidden. It is, however, foreign. Their access to this part of the tradition has shown them that it is a masculine text, one that they are thus removed from. While there may be multiple reasons why they do not take
Talmud more seriously (“it’s hard” Alana notes), its masculine and therefore distant quality is a contributing factor.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

My study investigated Modern Orthodox girls’ dissonant, creative and adaptive responses to their religious and gender identities as they negotiated the tensions between authority and autonomy in a Modern Orthodox all-girls’ school, and looked at the way in which the school, as a socializing agent, played a role in this development. It led to the following major research question, as stated in the introduction:

What, if any, are the girls creative, adaptive and dissonant responses to living within and between modern and Orthodox discourses?

The three sub-questions that arise from this broader question are as follows:

a. How do the girls of Yehudia understand their Modern Orthodox lives and practices?

b. How does a dual (modern/secular and Jewish Orthodox) curriculum that supports competing and conflicting discourses affect these girls’ ideas and practices around religious life?

c. How does being female in a discursive space that supports both a traditional patriarchal religious structure, as well as autonomy and egalitarianism, affect the girls’ understanding of and relationship with Modern Orthodox Jewish life?

This study situated itself as one of only a handful of studies (El-Or, 2002; Lehmann, 2009, 2010, 2011; Segal, 2011 as the primary examples) that looked at the inner-workings of Modern Orthodox school-life using qualitative ethnographic methods.\(^{60}\) Much has been written in the Modern Orthodox world about a philosophy or

\(^{60}\) There are, to my knowledge, no such quantitative studies.
theory of Modern Orthodoxy (For example: Bieler, 1986; Hartman, 1985; Schacter, 1989); Lichtenstein, 2004 amongst others), and even more in the popular press or as part of the Modern Orthodoxy community’s intellectual (but not research based) discourse about what constitutes a ‘true’ or ideal Modern Orthodoxy. However, such discussions are conducted with a limited research-based understanding of how those who conceive of themselves as Modern Orthodox learn to be so, along with limited documentation and theorization of their lived practice. There has been a prioritization of theory as the determining factor as to what constitutes an ‘ideal’ Modern Orthodox education (see Sokolow, 2009; and Bieler (2008)) over decisions based upon its lived expression. The discrepancy between theory and practice will be explored below in the section on the implications of this study for Modern Orthodox education. My study begins to open up what Pomson (2011) calls the ‘black box’ of Jewish educational environments (i.e. where the ‘doing’ of education happens in schools) to the lens of research, instead of focusing on its outcomes (e.g. intermarriage, rates of continued religious practice and affiliation, etc.). As such, it sheds light on and contributes to an understanding of how Modern Orthodoxy is learned in school and lived in practice, rather than how ideologues hope it should be lived in theory.

Some recent examples: Haber, A. (2014) Sharpening the Message: Recommendations for Improving the Effectiveness of Religious Education in Yeshiva High Schools. Jerusalem: ATID; Lookjed XIV:35, 2/21/2012; Symposium on Modern Orthodox Day School.(2009). Meorot: A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse, 7(2); the TorahMusings blog (see his post on January 14, 2008 in particular); Finkelman, Y. (2008). A Good Close Look at our Students. In Teaching toward tomorrow: Setting an agenda for Modern Orthodox education. Jerusalem: ATID. This edited collection is a good example where most of the essays are not research-based, but are meant, as the title suggests, to generate a new agenda for Modern Orthodox education.
This study is also situated within a broader post-structuralist research agenda around religious practices in modernity (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Asad, 1993, 2009; Avishai, 2008; Brown, 1992; Fabian, 1998; Jamal, 2005, 2009; Keane, 1997; Mahmood, 2005) with an eye to how religious practices are reconstructed and reconceived through this interaction. As part of looking at practices and discourses instead of outcomes or the way practice adheres to the conceptual expectations of one or another orthodox philosophy, this study tries to tease apart the discourses in an orthodoxy that is open to modern life in a way that is not merely intellectual and cognitive but material and cultural. My focus on discourse has shed new light on the ways in which practitioners with access to divergent discourses, such as authority and autonomy or egalitarianism, re-form and re-create traditional categories, and challenge previous way of conceptualizing Modern Orthodoxy by observing it in practice.

I was particularly interested in the gender aspects of the interaction between modernity and orthodoxy. Methodologically, I believed that the tensions (and therefore creative adaptations or areas of dissonance) between discourses related to Modern Orthodoxy’s two distinct constituent elements would be more pronounced for girls, owing to Orthodoxy’s patriarchal rituals and structure. I therefore hypothesized gender would be a more generative space in which to explore how modern and traditional discourses emerge when in overt interaction. I also looked to use Mahmood’s (2005) feminist post-structuralist understanding of docility in conservative religions as a form of feminism, and investigate if this framework could be applied to Modern Orthodox girls religious practice.
My hypothesis upon entering Yehudia was that for girls there would be areas of dissonance resulting from conflicting discourses, creative responses that tread new ground, and adaptive reactions that would preserve existing religious structures in more manageable ways, and I will describe how girls found creative or adaptive responses to areas of potential dissonance. I hypothesized that I would find these creative, dissonant or adaptive responses based on two assumptions: First, that the girls experience a tension between the discourses of authority and autonomy found in their lives (and traced by Lehmann (2007, 2009)), and second, that being a modern female in a patriarchal religion would engender a special degree of dissonance, and a need for creative or adaptive responses in order to maintain a Modern Orthodox practice. While I found many examples of creativity and adaptation, I found little in the way of dissonant responses to Orthodoxy. I intend to discuss the significance of this finding below.

6.1: Creative, adaptive and dissonant responses to living between modernity and Orthodoxy

What surprised me the most, and what is one of the most significant findings of this study, is the apparent lack of dissonance amongst the girls of Yehudia when it comes to religious practice. The girls exhibit very little if any tension between the authoritative expectations of ritual and halachic life, and the autonomous impulses of modernity. Dissonance is not in any obvious way part of their religious life experience. The question I will attempt to answer, and have addressed throughout my study is – why not?

Samuel Heilman (1990), one of the progenitors of a sociological approach to Modern Orthodoxy, describes compartmentalization as a coping mechanism for dealing
with the tensions between modern and traditional values. Compartmentalization implies that things Orthodox and things modern simply occupy separate discursive realms for the individual. In one sense, this was true at Yehudia. I found that girls often did separate between their religious and non-religious/secular lives and the values of each space. A good example of this is their relationship with egalitarianism. They saw their social lives as grounded in the value of equal treatment of men and women, the violation of which they would never accept. And yet, despite their assumption of social equality, they did not have trouble accepting the areas of ritual practice in which women were not allowed to participate in equal measure to men. This would appear, on the surface, to be a form of compartmentalizing.

Yet why the girls accepted this division is not so clear. I argued that they accepted the ritual inequality not because a bifurcation between the two value sets would otherwise result in conflict, but because inequality in the social realm was to their disadvantage, but in the ritual realm was something they saw as being to their advantage, i.e. not having the burden of extra *mitzvah* performance. This was clearly stated by Samantha when she said, “I’d like not to have so many rules, thank you for the opportunity God.” This point makes a good example of how a post-structural analysis gives insight into social practices, by seeing how subjects use existing social structures to their own benefit, even when those same structures would seem on the surface to be disadvantageous. Therefore, what might appear as a bifurcation in order to maintain conflicting discourses and in order to maintain the integrity of the two realms they participate in (a la Heilman), is instead understood as a move that, for the girls’, maximize the benefits of each discursive space.
The case of halacha is a good example of how girls adapted their understanding of a traditional category in order to reduce potential dissonance. I describe how girls accepted halacha’s full authority, and yet had an understanding of it that did not conform to a normative Orthodox, even Modern Orthodox, outlook. In traditional Orthodoxy, and even much of Modern Orthodoxy, normative halachic decisions are given a divine imprimatur despite their human origins. Human legal decisions represent the working out of an original divine mandate. Even as this ‘working out’ happens in history, from the traditional practitioner’s point of view, the decisions have an ahistorical status. Despite the diversity of opinions on each subject, certain positions have developed a normative status, even as the alternate opinions continue to exist in de jure form.

For the girls in my study, all three of these elements – the implications of human intervention in the halachic process, the impact of history on halachic decisions, and the validity given to different positions in halacha, all lead to shifts in how they relate to halacha. I found that changes happen in their understanding of halacha as a result of their exposure to the plurality and historical consciousness found in modern culture in general and the discourse of autonomy in particular, and that these act as a mechanism through which they can keep halacha’s authoritative status but adjust to its particular expectations that would not be tenable in their own lives. Modesty or tzniut is a prime example of this process, as are the rules around physical relationships between boys and girls which are normatively prohibited by halacha, but where one of my informants was quite explicit about its lack of applicability to her. This young woman in no way rejected the authority of halacha – only its particular application to heterosexual touch. This and other examples cited in chapter four cannot be described as compartmentalization or a
separation of practice and values, since the girls accept *halacha* in a fundamental sense. Rather, it describes the syncretic work of practitioners who find themselves in a liminal space between two sets of normative discursive structures and need to find a way to make adaptations in order to live at the borderland between them.

The school itself plays a role in decreasing the potential dissonance I assumed I would find: within the hidden curriculum as a consequence of school policies as understood by the girls, and through pedagogical classroom practices. Reflecting on how they are educated, the girls are aware that they are taught a lot about Jewish practice, but also seem to believe that what they are taught by the school is not necessarily expected of them. They sometimes constructed this attitude as a distinction between academic expectations (what they are taught and tested on in class) and life practice. By teaching in this way, the school released girls from meeting expectations that were too onerous or which could be described in this context as dissonant.

Further, in that the administration does not overtly and explicitly expect girls to adhere to the school’s policies around religious practice when outside of the school (as is the case with Ma’ayan), two things results. At one level, girls began to associate some of the onerous religious rules with school rules, with *tzniut* being the most obvious and contentious. As a result, girls could formally push back against religious rules, but pass off this rejection as a rejection of school rules – not religious ones. This move prevented religion in general from becoming a subject of their critique. This same process seems to

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62 To be clear, that is not meant to imply that they do not actively participate as Modern Orthodox Jews in such normative practices as Shabbat, Kashrut and the like. Rather, that what they are taught in school is in far more detail and above what their home/community practices are, and that the school does not exhibit the expectation that they are meant to follow all of these rules, even if, from the school’s point of view, they are expected obligations of a Modern Orthodox Jew.
characterize a series of religious expectations (Torah learning, tzniut and prayer), the common trend being that girls can relate to them positively outside of school or outside the school’s formal expectations (e.g. mincha), but not inside. Learning Torah in seminary was exciting, but not at school. Prayer at mincha (even in school, since it was non-obligatory) was a positive experience, but not shacharit, which was obligatory. Tzniut at school did not mean much, unless modesty was exhibited outside of school as well (and therefore done because of reasons other than the school’s expectations). While the grammar of schools can in some cases be seen as deadening the experience of religious life by making it into something academic, cerebral and of ‘GPA’ value, this very identification frees up other spaces for religious life to be seen as positive and autonomously motivated. By pointing to school as the source of their religious disaffection, the girls were spared from having to perform a full-on rejection of religion’s authority. Dissonance toward religious practice in general was reduced through the school/non-school distinction and the scapegoating of the school.

The second consequence of not demanding that girls adhere to specific religious practices outside of school was that girls learned, as part of the hidden curriculum, that they were subjects endowed with choice around religious decisions. As long as the school did not have a religious expectation, they deduced, religious decisions must be theirs to make (even if the decision was made on the basis communal or familial norms, it did not necessarily include what they had learned about religious practice at school).

The way in which reason and choice operated at Yehudia also helps make sense of the lack of dissonance. An assumption around choice was implicit in my observations about, and the girls’ description of, an apologetic pedagogical practice. Girls described,
and I observed, their being taught in such a manner that the teacher presented reasons for why specific aspects of religious life were compelling, thus trying to have girls accept religious norms on their own terms. The approach of providing reasons and its implicit acceptance of free-choice (i.e. if I find the reasons compelling, I will do it, and if not, I won’t) encouraged the girls’ sense of themselves as being able to choose between the varieties of legal options with which they are presented. While girls could feel empowered by this approach, it did not necessarily lead to ‘reasoned’ decisions, but those of personal preference. This is reflected in Rivki’s description that, “…like of course we can have a discussion and contradict. Putting your opinion was always like a good thing… A lot of teachers they’ll sometimes just say, whatever, you have your opinion and I have mine, and like, that’s it, when they’re opinions… [The teacher will] bring proof, it’s like they’re showing us, they’re teaching us, they’re showing, well no, from here and here it says something like this, and then we can bring proof as to why we think that. And if we don’t have anything we’re going to kind of be stumped, and be like, I don't really agree with that, but I get it, and move on.” At the end of the day, it seems, a student has learned to make her own decision regardless of the reason provided. In this pedagogical approach, girls learn about their position as choosers, even as they are drawn into specific religious practices by the reasons provided.

The implications of ‘choice’ are different in a non-Orthodox Jewish day school, but there may be a parallel to learn. At Yehudia, choice is found within a broader acceptance of halacha and religious authorities more broadly, with many of the specifics of practice chosen by each girl. In a community day school environment, even the broad categories of religious life (e.g. God, halacha, Torah) are subject to choice, and not taken
for granted. In this sense, the range of what can be chosen (i.e. one’s specific halachik path vs. halacha in general; one’s relationship to biblical text vs. an acceptance of the bible as true or relevant) makes it hard to suggest that the findings of this study would be relevant to a community day school.

And yet, there may be a parallel to this finding for non-Orthodox schools. A possible suggestion is that narrative, one that draws both on Jewish history and the stories of traditional Jewish texts, may act as some form of substitute for the normative authoritarian Orthodox meta-narratives of halacha and God. Stories bind and motive being people in a way that authorities and abstract principles often do not (Fasching, 1992), and do so through internal ascent, not external command. Might it be possible to develop a religious narrative within a non-Orthodox day school environment that could present a viable option for students, for whom religious observance and ‘ultimate values’ such as God and Torah are not necessarily viable? Could it provide a framework within which practitioners could actively choose the specific nature of their religious practice, similar to the way an acceptance of halacha in general creates the space for the Yehudia girls to make their own specific halachik choices? This is clearly work for another study, but it provides an intriguing framework for consideration.

The findings of this study are also relevant when looking at the interaction of divergent discourses in a community day school, even as the nature of how each discourse operates is different from the Yehudia context. No matter how much closer a liberal Jewish outlook may be to contemporary Western cultural norms, it seems

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63 This is something I have begun toying with at the day school where I work, with an emphasis on narrative (biblical and otherwise) as a way to frame religious learning, instead of notions of obligation and authority.
inevitable that one will find some discrepancy between the two, as they emerge from divergent discursive spaces, and still retain some degree of difference. Some notion of authority, even if it is the authority of tradition instead of the authority of God, is part of any Jewish studies learning experience. There has been much theorizing about curriculum integration in Jewish education as a way to resolve these tensions (see Levisohn, 2008 for an exhaustive analysis), and a more recent attempt by Levisohn (2008) to instead focus on integrity as a pedagogical approach in contrast to integration of curricular materials. However, both Levisohn and those he builds upon look at the inputs of Jewish education alone, in contrast to this study, which observes the outputs of any such implementation. At a minimum, this study therefore questions how any approach, either of integration or integrity, would function in a real day school environment given the unpredictable relationship in practice between these divergent discourses.

Moving away from how dissonance is avoided and toward the girls’ creative responses, one powerful example is how the girls come to find a sense of ownership or personalization through the use of primary texts, thus bridging their relationship to tradition. When discussing the Talmud’s case of Yehudit and the decision to sterilize herself, the girls drew on primary narrative religious texts not simply as religious proof-texts, but as expressions of their personal perspective. This personalization was seen in their language through the use of the first-person, as well as in the way they used the texts to support and make sense of the moral dilemma they were facing, rather than resorting to other (e.g. abstract reasoning or universal religious) ideas. By adopting and adapting the texts, the girls were engaging in a creative act of taking that which is traditional and authoritative and bringing it within their own moral framework.
Instead of saying, then, that Modern Orthodoxy compartmentalizes or not, assumes dissonance or syncretism, it may be more accurate to say that even within a single community like Yehudia, practitioners of Modern Orthodoxy partake in more than one of these possibilities depending on where we look. Such an understanding of Modern Orthodoxy follows Fabian’s (1998) notion of freedom as one that appears in moments, or Kenway’s (1994) post-structuralist conception that freedom fluctuates by circumstance and context, instead of being something fixed and structural. The girls of Yehudia use the traditional structure of *halacha* in some places to enjoy freedom from the obligations of ritual that are expected of boys (with prayer and its related demands as an obvious example), even as their exclusion imposes a limitation on potential spiritual outlets; they embrace prayer at moments when it expresses their freedom, such as during *mincha* or at camp, but not when it feels constricting, as when the school demands it; and they embrace Torah learning as a value in their lives (as evidenced by the excitement for post-high school seminary learning in Israel), but without it making serious demands on their present circumstances. This study contributes to a further understanding of freedom as contextual and circumstantial, and by doing so in a religious context, liberates one from the either/or notion of religious practice as being situated in a discourse of authority, or rejecting that authority in favor of autonomy.

The way the girls use the existing structures to their advantage is similar and parallel to notions in Willis (1977) and Maclaren (1986), who describe how existing social structures are transformed through the agency of subjects who are not accepted as normative within those systems. In Willis’ and Maclaren’s studies, subjects use a structure that disadvantages them to create their own, self-developed and self-valued
identities. In the case of my study, girls access aspects of different discourses depending on the circumstance and context, in order to make their overall religious experience a positive part of their own lives.

My research has extended the study of modern religious practice, and the ways in which its practitioners find new ways to live their religious lives within the inherited structures of traditional religion. And similar to Mahmood (2005), Fader (2009) and others discussed in the review of literature in chapter two (e.g. Jamal, 2005, 2009; Peshkin, 1986; Seale-Collazo, 2003 etc.), this research further substantiates the notion that while autonomy has entered religious life, it has not done so at the expense of structures of authority. The practitioners of Modern Orthodoxy that I have studied have many reasons to continue their religious practice, and find ways to adjust religious categories from within in order to retain these practices and their traditional structures, and not simply to reject them as unacceptable burdens or limitations on their own autonomy, or as challenges to their acceptance of Jewish religious principles.

These conclusions are significant in a number of ways. They continue to challenge, as Lehmann, Mahmood and others have, the binary between authority and autonomy, and the expectation that an increase of the latter will result in a rejection of the former. Further, the resulting religious practice happens in ways that theoreticians could not predict in advance, but instead follow from the needs of a practitioner to live a coherent life. The girls of Yehudia have done this through a creative understanding of halacha, and their adaptive reconstruction of a patriarchal halachic system of ritual, in order to live full religious lives. The new understandings the girls generate and the diversity these novelties imply about how and why practitioners live religious lives in
modernity are important for researchers whose assumptions about religious practices may be binary in nature. The lack of dissonance in the girls’ practice is particularly noteworthy in this regard, both because the assumption of dissonance has been a sustaining feature in analyses of Modern Orthodoxy, and because its absence begs the question of the assumption that the presence of autonomy will naturally challenge and undermine regimes of authority.

6.2: Gender and modern religious life

Two of the sub-questions in my study relate to the role of gender in modern religious life, and it is to the conclusions I draw about gender that I now want to turn. Tamar El-Or (2002) makes the astute observation that new educational opportunities for women in religious communities will not resolve the existing tension between the modern and religious worlds, but rather “organize it in a new and different way” (p. 47). I want to begin with the explicit educational opportunities available at Yehudia, since one part of my study has been an attempt see what if any ‘new organization’ exists in a North American, Modern Orthodox context. I believe a significant part of the contribution of this study is in describing the very novelties El-Or suggests are possible. Like the women in El-Or’s study, the girls of Yehudia have exposure to primary religious texts in general and religious legal texts in particular, an exposure that seems to be one element in the process of their adaptive and creative responses to traditional practice. Yet it is not only the exposure, but how these texts are presented (i.e. pedagogy) and the messages they learn from them, that affects the girls’ relationship to these texts, as learned from Safer (2003).
From a certain Modern Orthodox feminist perspective (Blu Greenberg, 1981), equal exposure to text is to be celebrated. However, the impact on the girls is more complex. Several girls noted the distance they felt from Talmudic texts, its thinking and content, specifically pointing to the male-oriented subject matter and masculine thinking it represented. Clearly, more than exposure is necessary to create a bridge for these girls to make meaningful connections to the Talmud and the halachic codes. As long as girls recognize texts as male-oriented in thinking or subject matter, those texts will not be felt to reflect their own experience. While the girls do not reject these texts, they described the texts as psychologically distant from them. As this chasm is not noted, confronted or talked about within their class context, the result is that the girls become increasingly but apathetic to these texts.

And yet, as referenced above, perhaps the most notable impact of the girls being included in normative text-study was the voice they felt they had. In the chapter on ‘Reasons to Choose’ I shared a long passage that followed an argument between a teacher and student about why women were exempt from time-bound commandments, and the student’s successful challenge of her teacher’s apologetic attempt to rationalize this halacha despite its implicit misogyny. Another incident arose during a class led by the Rosh Yeshiva, where I observed a girl also successfully challenge a position he had presented in class, and his acceptance that her argument was indeed the correct one. A similar phenomenon could also be seen in an excerpt discussed in chapter four from Rivki, and the conviction she had about the correctness of her own halachic conclusions against those of her teacher.
What emerges from this discussion about the girls’ connection to and distance from traditional texts is that while a specific connection to text may or may not exist, the exposure to text allows the girls see themselves as part of the religious conversation. Being part of this conversation permits the girls, as with the examples above, to minimally challenge and maximally reject their teachers’ interpretations of the texts they study, thus granting them grounds upon which to construct aspects of their own religious life. Their increased relationship to text helps account for some of the creativity and adaptation noted throughout this study. What conclusions arise as a result of their distance from rabbinic texts is less clear from this study, and would merit further investigation.

The formal curriculum is only one area in which gender operates at Yehudia. Beyond the halachic contingency I observed as one of their ways to cope with a demanding authority, gender norms also played a strong role in their acceptance of religious authority. In contrast to their perception of Modern Orthodox boys, the girls of Yehudia saw themselves as rule followers. This was a distinguishing factor in being a Yehudia girl, and to betray it was to be labeled a ‘bad girl’ (by the school authorities and their community) and incur the social stigma that went along with the former. Thus, part of the willingness to accept the halachic rules of their environment came about less because of religious obligation of autonomous choice, and more because of fear of social consequences related to gender (e.g. “…our school, the administration-wise, values, like, the quiet girls, the girls who wouldn’t do anything against their rules”). Boys, from the girls’ point of view, were far less constrained by this social expectation, which they felt gets reinforced by the school and the differential treatment of the sexes. The sustaining
nature of Orthodox practice in this context arises, in part, as a result of how girls are expected to act and the stigmas attached to ‘acting out’ – which is to say, punishment of difference (St. Pierre, 2000). Punishment of difference follows Brown’s (1992) observation about the way in which discourses about women become naturalized within a system and end up sustaining it. The girls themselves were conscious of the need to follow rules as a compelling element in their decisions, even if they may not have been entirely aware of the impact and limitations it had more broadly on their behavior.

One could thus draw the conclusion that part of the sustaining nature of Modern Orthodox practice in the Yehudia context is the way gendered norms are exploited through the system to reduce aberrant behavior, i.e. power. While I do not think the school leadership was conscious of having created these dynamics, the girls felt themselves nonetheless to be constrained in how they were allowed to act and behave. Dissonance between modern and orthodox values thus gets reduced through norms around gender, and how they limit the ways in which girls can express themselves outside of the school. It is also an example of how freedom comes in ‘moments’, as this is clearly a case where the freedom to rebel is granted to boys because of the sustaining male privilege and power in Orthodox culture, but denied to girls as it forces them to follow the rules.

Some girls did find room to exercise difference and challenge normative gender boundaries. While *ruach* operated within the school structure, it still challenged the notion of a ‘good girl’ as passive or submissive. Daniella and Samantha attempted to challenge the gendered expectations made of them in their desire to act more like ‘guys’, which is to say, to challenge and even act without concern for how they would be judged.
As an extension of this desire, I tracked their critique of women who, from their point of view, sacrificed their careers for their families – something they felt only a woman would do. Although this pushing of the gender boundary was the exception rather than the rule among the girls, it is another example of Pomerantz’s (2004) exhortation to consider anew what feminism looks like today.

Perhaps the most significant finding in this regard was, as discussed above, the girls’ acceptance of ritual inequality because of its apparent benefits. On one hand, as someone with feminist commitments, the girls’ apathy toward their own unequal treatment is concerning to me. Yet on the other, their use of a patriarchal system for their own benefit is, as noted, a notable feminist outcome.

What emerges from my observations about gender is therefore complex. On one hand, some girls take advantage of the existing inequality in ritual expectation, but suffer from gendered stigma about bad behavior. Additionally, girls find themselves empowered by their exposure to some traditional texts, but distant from the male-centeredness of others. In raising these complications, my study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender operates in divergent and inconsistent ways within a traditional community. These conclusions prevent one from assuming that gender differences are always bad or burdensome, or that formal equity would be seen as a thoroughly advantageous outcome.

I want to place these findings in the context of Mahmood’s research, and Avishai’s re-appraisal of Mahmood’s work in a Jewish Modern Orthodox context. In so doing, I intend to demonstrate a more complex way in which their ideas can be applied. Like both Avishai and Mahmood, I observe the way in which agency is not necessarily
equated with resistance. Instead of rejecting *halacha*, the girls reformulate an approach to *halacha* that allows them to live within its authority. This form of agency resembles a form of Avishai’s ‘doing religion’ (rather than Mahmood’s docility), with the girls acting creatively to be able to ‘do religion’ on terms that reduce dissonance with the discourse of autonomy, and embracing religious practice that is not co-extensive with school authority (prayer, dress and learning). The Yehudia girls’ acceptance of ritual inequality is another way in which we can observe the girls’ using the existing patriarchal system to establish a comfortable relationship with traditional Judaism.

On the other hand, the construction of girls as rule-followers, while operating to reduce dissonance, is a structure of submission and control, not agency, even a form of docility. In some ways, we saw *ruach* as an outlet for active agency feelings that does not challenge the gender boundary. The exceptions to this were Daniella’s and Samantha’s attempts to challenge the kind of gender boundary, which I discussed above in relation to Pomerantz (2004), and the way skater girls pushed the boundary of normative femininity toward norms that were normatively masculine.

To a certain extent, my findings represent a more complex tale than the ‘doing religion’ of Avishai or the ‘docility’ of Mahmood, especially in light of absence of dissonance among the girls. Sometimes the girls of Yehudia act with an explicit agency that resists traditional gender norms, as with Samantha and Daniella; sometimes their agency manifests as a ‘doing religion,’ as with the cases of *halacha*’s authority and the moral textual frame; and sometimes it is absent, and rather manifests as submission to traditional gender norms, as the in the case of rule-following. An overall picture therefore demands a recognition that one lens does not fit the breadth of the girls’ religious
experience. In this way my work contributes to the post-structuralist feminist research begun by Mahmood and Avishai by not trying to make all religious decisions fit into one framework, and does not assume that if a girl acts with agency in one context within their religious lives it means they do so in all places within their religious experience. While my research avoids, “the false dichotomy that pits compliance and agency,” (Avishai, 2008, 429) by adopting Mahmood and Avishai as guides, it also acknowledges that both compliance and resistance occur in traditional religion in ways that continue to challenge feminism in conservative religions.

6.3: Implications for modern religious education

As a day school practitioner, I have found it challenging to draw educational prescriptions from this study. It has demonstrated, among other things, the challenges of being overly prescriptive in modern religious education. My findings on agency are similar to those of Peshkin (1986), Seale-Collazo (2003), and MacLaren (1986) who describe the agency enacted by practitioners in an Orthodox religious world outside of the normative boundaries of religious practice. Those authors also draw attention to the unexpected consequences religious teaching has on its students, and the unpredictable ways in which students enact their learning.

In order to make my point about the limited impact of prescriptions in religious education clearer, I would like to contrast it with an article that appeared in the journal Meorot, subtitled A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse. This journal published an article by Dr. Moshe Sokolow (2009), a professor of Jewish education at Yeshiva University’s Azrieli School for Education and Administration (and a Modern Orthodox
Jew). The article was titled “What Should a Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and Be Able to Do?” referring specifically to a Modern Orthodox high school graduate. There he lists, in bullet-point form, a set of expectations that emerge from a particular understanding of what constitutes Modern Orthodoxy. It is not that such lists or goals for a Modern Orthodox education are not useful or coherent. Rather, they fall short on several important practical points, as evidenced by my findings here.

First, these lists emerge from a theory about Modern Orthodoxy (largely based on the theorists noted above on page two of this chapter), and not from an honest understanding of its practice. That is to say, the vantage point of Dr. Sokolow and the theorists he draws on are premised upon how modern culture and thought (which are by no means synonymous) can exist in concert with traditional Orthodoxy. This approach thus works from a set of a priori assumptions about what should happen in a Modern Orthodox social and educational environment, instead of creating goals in response to the lived experience of Modern Orthodox Jews. In contrast, this research uses a different set of assumptions. Instead of asking what Modern Orthodoxy should or could be, or how it is conceptually possible or not possible to fit things modern and Orthodox together (Kaplan, 1979), it assumes that aspects of both exist together as part of a lived experience, with a desire to understand how the practitioners make this happen, and an openness to the unpredictability of this venture.

Further, and as noted by Sokolow’s critics, who were asked to respond to his list as a part of the article’s publication, his focus is highly cognitive. By seeing Modern Orthodoxy primarily as a cognitive project (Bechoffer, 2011; Kaplan, 1979) that re-imagines Orthodoxy in light of modernity (Hartman, 1985; Sacks, 1990), it does not
relate to the broader lived experience of Modern Orthodox practitioners: discursive, structural and material. At a discursive level, Modern Orthodoxy for the girls of Yehudia is not primarily a cognitive or intellectual project, but about the capacity for choice in their religious lives. As such, they are very pragmatic (similar to what Brill (2004, 2011) observes about much of Modern Orthodoxy) in how they achieve the ends that meet their needs. As discussed, their understanding of very conventional religious categories like ‘halacha,’ an adherence to which is primary for Sokolow, is part of a pragmatic attempt to live with autonomy as well as an uphold halachic system. Such differences make recommendations about an ideal Modern Orthodox education and its implementations challenging, if not problematic, since the reality of practice does not accord with the theorists’ ideals. Should one double down on one’s efforts to enforce a normative halachic structure? Does it substantively challenge a transmission model of religious education (at some level always necessary for religious practice to perpetuate itself), thus demanding a new paradigm for religious education in modernity? Or is it important to have more meta-conversations about religious practice and the way it challenges the students’ own assumptions of autonomy (as Lehmann (2007) suggests)?

Addressing another aspect of my findings, the ‘grammar of schools’ profoundly affects how the girls relate to and make sense of their religious lives. School structure complicates the implementation of Sokolow’s educational expectations for a Modern Orthodox day school, both for what is and is not taught in class. Once religious and school norms become co-extensive, the results are unpredictable and complex. Thus, even if one were to grant Sokolow his list as a set of desired curricular goals, one would be hard pressed, having seen the very different reactions to religious practice girls’
express in and out of school, the framework of schools is the right model at all for a Modern Orthodox education. It hardly seems a healthy thing for school to be an outlet for negative religious feelings (if one’s goal is the transmission of a tradition, as is the case at most Jewish day schools), but as I observe, there is an upside to this relationship, even if one would not say in advance that it was desirable. The upside is that by focusing negative religious energies toward the religious authority of the school instead of religious as an overall set of life commitments, it allows the girls to create and construct another space that is religiously positive and engaging. Thus, while the overall picture leaves the girls with a positive relationship to Jewish Orthodoxy, it comes at the expense of a tremendous investment of time and money that the school and community believe they are making toward the same ends. In this way, the school succeeds in its religious goals specifically in spite of itself.

A final concern I have with a list such as Dr. Sokolow’s is that by its very nature it constricts the plurality of lived practice. Lists with specific expectations narrow rather than broaden the relationship between the Modern and Orthodox parts of Modern Orthodoxy, and discourage alternative practices that might be imagined (or created, as by the girls themselves).\(^6\) Observation of Modern Orthodox practitioners in an educational setting reveals that there are multiple ways in which it is possible to be, live as, and conceive of one’s self as a Modern Orthodox Jew. This does not mean that traditional religious practice can or should be a free-for-all. Rather, it points to the importance of considering the diversity of a lived practice when developing educational goals, and how

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\(^6\) While this study has tried to support a positive view of this creativity, its very unpredictability, and the power it places into the hands of practitioners, could easily be threatening (and therefore unacceptable) to religious authority.
practitioners make sense of what they have learned in order to live a religious life.

Qualitative research of this kind forces one to ask what kinds of things ‘really matter’ to practitioners of Modern Orthodoxy or any other religious creed, and how implementation produces unintended consequences that both benefit and hinder its adherents. This study thus acts as a model for those seeking out new manifestations of traditional practice as yet unimagined by its theorists.

Another implication for educators to think about is the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971) that operates at Yehudia in a way that is sometimes at odds with the very religious values the teachers and administrators aim to teach. The school sends implicit messages to the girls about how they should behave in contrast to boys, while at the same time the school is trying to empower its students through strong female role models;65 it teaches them Talmud, but not with the same process or intensity with which boys are taught; and it empowers an expectation of choice in religious life, even as they also expect deference to rules. Without becoming more aware of these tensions, the school turns the girls against its own desired values without realizing.

Beyond the hidden curriculum as it applies to gender is the way that pedagogical practices reinforce students perception of their own position as ‘choosers’ or autonomous agents within their religious space. While Rabbi Shemesh saw his apologetic approach as the only bridge to the girls strong sense of autonomy, it seems to have had the unintended consequence of giving girls an even stronger sense that it was they, and not the Torah or other authorities, that get to decide the law.

65 Like WOW: Women of the World – a program created to expose girls to strong and varied female role-models, but one which had a complicated impact.
In this way, my work serves as a cautionary message to Modern Orthodox educators. It is a reminder that modern schools may not always be the right places to teach religious values and practice, and of the complexity that results. It is also, I hope, a call to Modern Orthodox educators to become more aware of how gender operates in their schools, in ways both intended and unintended. Even though Modern Orthodoxy embraces many aspects of feminism, especially when it comes to social equality, and explicitly keeps it at bay in others, as in the realm of ritual, it is unintended and unmentioned phenomena like ‘rule-following,’ and the complex relationship with a male-centered Talmudic text, that need the attention of educators. Absent this, patterns of gender discrimination and limitations for young women will persist in unintended ways.

6.4: Limitations of this study

While the study of an all-girls institution for the purpose of understanding the girls’ experience on its own terms is certainly worthwhile, there is potential added value in studying the girls school in comparison to the boys school. The girls in this study clearly understand their Jewish identities in contrast to those of boys, especially regarding the different expectations they see the school as having of each group. It would be interesting both to explore how the boys understand themselves in the areas in which the girls raise concern, and further, in what ways their own gendered identities are formed in contrast to girls.

As I noted in the methodology section, there were some inherent limitations on what I could observe and have access to within the institution as a male and as a rabbi. There were spaces I could not enter, both physical and symbolic. I could not enter the
locker area (which was not a change area, but an open space – simply one that girls had allocated to themselves), enter their prayer space, or be present during choir practice. In addition, I was not able to observe the mishpacha (Family) class when they spoke about matters relating to body and sexuality. These spaces would have been rich spaces for a researcher to investigate, and would have been accessible to a female.

A natural objection to my authorship of this study would seem to be that as a traditional religious Jewish male, I embody the very patriarchy I wished to examine, and furthermore, lack a perspective into the female experience of a religious life lived within these structural realities. These are legitimate concerns, as of course bias is present in any qualitative study (Behar 1993; Wolf, 1992). I have tried to address some of these concerns in the methodology section above, and so will not repeat myself here. I would instead suggest that a future study would benefit from the perspective of a female researcher. At the same time, I would caution that while such a perspective would add to the depth of this kind of study, it would be a mistake to consider it more accurate or legitimate simply by virtue of the gender of the author.

Beyond my being male, my commitment to some sort of Modern Orthodox Judaism also presents a complicating factor, as well as my feminist beliefs. As Mahmood (2005) and Francis (1999) have noted, it is important to understand when one’s commitment to feminism functions in its liberatory, rather than analytic, capacity. While I have used the latter in order to make sense of my research site and Modern Orthodoxy, it is with the awareness that this study may well have an impact on the former in the Modern Orthodox community. Whether I achieved any sort of catalytic validity, as Lather (1993) speaks of, was not clear to me, even as the some of the girls shared the
what a positive and revelatory experience the interviews and conversations were for them. However, seeing the ways girls used the gendered nature of the system to their advantage presented me with a personal conflict. On one hand, I was pleased to see how they used the system to create more space for themselves as women, and to perhaps offer an alternative model of Orthodox feminism that need not demand ritual equality. On the other hand, this very embrace comes with a certain rejection of the value inherent within traditional religious practice which I practice seriously. The analytic lens thus presents a challenge for me as a Modern Orthodox practitioner and participant by offering a model of liberatory practice in which I question the cost at which this freedom is achieved.

6.5: Recommendations for further research

This was a qualitative ethnographic study, and as such, was not intended to afford conclusions about Modern Orthodoxy or religious practice in modernity in general. It is a particular case, studied deeply, with the intention of developing a more coherent understanding of the permutations of how traditional religious practice and authoritative social structures change and are changed by a self-conscious relationship to modernity’s various discourses (e.g. autonomy, individuality, egalitarianism, etc.).

This study could provide the basis upon which to test a series of hypotheses about the Modern Orthodox community in North America through a broader quantitative or mixed-methods investigation. Research in this vein might test how broadly heteronormative conceptions of halacha extend in the Modern Orthodox community; the extent of individual and autonomous relationships to halacha and religious authority; the
extent to which there exists a differential between egalitarianism in the non-religious sphere and a continued patriarchal structure in the religious sphere, amongst others. It may also assess some of the differences raised here between male and female conceptions of Modern Orthodox practice, as regards both affective experience and rationale for ritual practice.

It would also be useful to conduct a longitudinal study of this same group of girls at the various transition points that most of them see as part of the path of a Modern Orthodox girl. The transition from high school to seminary, to undergraduate college, to graduate school, to career, with marriage and children along the way is a seamless road in their minds, and part of the identity formation of a girl in their community. Tracking them through this process and observing the inevitable changes that they will undergo would be interesting specifically as those changes affect their understanding of, and relationship to, Modern Orthodoxy.

An aspect of this study that was touched on tangentially and has been little explored in research on contemporary religious practice was that of class. Alan Brill (2011) draws on research that describes Modern Orthodox society as largely upper-middle class, by income and by culture. As an example from my research, when asked to describe their trajectories, all girls included a gap year in Israel, which is a very expensive undertaking (with those who did not go having to go to lengths to explain why they did not make this choice), as well as an undergraduate and generally a professional graduate degree. This does not even take into account that their families have paid for twelve plus years of a private day-school education, and the financial burdens that entails. A further study could look more deeply at the way that assumptions around income,
work, and an upper-middle class lifestyle have influenced the practice and self-conception of teenage Modern Orthodox Jews.

6.6: Concluding remarks

Throughout my time in Yehudia I was continually amazed by the girls’ capacities to enthusiastically live their religious lives and take positions of school and communal leadership. From the beginning, I was aware of their self-confidence, positivity and energy. It took me some time to figure out how this all fit together with the assumptions about Modern Orthodox girls that I had brought, and what I knew about normative Modern Orthodoxy. Through their openness and willingness to answer my questions and make sense of their school community, they allowed me a deeper understanding of their religious selves. I hope that what I have learned can contribute to a broader understanding of religious life and practice today among educators and researchers.
References


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Glossary

Aliyah - An ‘aliyah’ literally means ‘ascension,’ which refers to going up to read from the Torah in front of the whole congregation during group prayer. In Orthodox synagogues, this is something only men can do, and including women in this practice is one of the changes made in non-Orthodox synagogues to achieve gender equality.

Aron – The ark where the Torah scrolls are stored

Bima - The table upon which the Torah is read in a synagogue

Chalav Yisrael – Milk that has be watched from when the cow is milked until it is packaged. Drinking only this kind of milk is seen by some as a stringency, and is not normative practice in the Modern Orthodox community.

Chachamim - Sages of the Oral Torah (Mishna and Talmud, circa 0-500 CE)

Chazen – The man who leads a prayer service

Chesed – Lit. ‘acts of kindness,’ such as organizing programs in the school and in the community, e.g. working with developmentally disabled or the poor.

Chinuch - Religious education classes

Chumash – The five books of Moses

Da’at (da’as) Torah - Access to transcendent understanding in halachic decision making that is not based in halachic sources

Daf Yomi - A page of the Talmud is referred to as a ‘daf,’ and those who learn one page a day refer to the popular practice as ‘daf yomi’

Daven –Yiddish for “pray”

Duchen - When the kohen (someone from a Priestly family) goes up to bless the entire congregation. This is something only men do.
**Galut** – Exile. Usually referring to exile from the land of Israel.

**Geder** - *Geder* is the Hebrew word for fence. It is used in *halacha* to refer to Rabbinic laws that were created in order to distance practitioners from transgressing biblical laws. For example, one cannot write on the Sabbath, but one could, biblically speaking, pick up a pencil to move it. Rabbinic law created a *geder* or fence around the Sabbath laws to prohibit even picking up a pencil.

**Halacha** – Jewish religious law

**Hashkafa** – Religious philosophy

**Hashem** – God

**Kavanah** – Lit. intention. It usually refers to the focus a person has during prayer.

**Kodesh** – Lit. holy. In this study the word refers to religious studies subjects, in contrast to secular, general studies subjects

**Kollel** - A seminary for Orthodox married men

**Kosher** – Lit. ‘acceptable.’ Usually used in reference to food.

**Leyn** - Read from the Torah scroll publicly in the synagogue, something which, in Orthodox synagogues, only men do.

**Lubavitch** - A sect of Hasidism

**Madrichot** – Female counselors

**Mefarshim** - Commentators on the bible

**Mincha** – The daily afternoon prayer

**Mishpacha** - Lit. family. In this study it refers to a class the girls have once a week about the family, marriage, relationships, etc.
Mitzvot (pl.)/mitzvah (s.) – A commandment from God. Can refer to something someone sees as a good deed.

Morah – A female teacher

Rosh Yeshiva – Headmaster, or literally, head of the Yeshiva

Ruach - energy or spirit

Shabbat/Sharbos – The Sabbath

Shabbaton - From the word Shabbat, it is when people gather together for an entire Shabbat together, often away from home at a hotel or in another city.

Shacharit – The daily morning prayer

Shlichim - Israelis who come to teach in the school for three-year terms

Shiur - A class about a Torah topic

Shomer negiah - The halacha that men and women who are not married are forbidden to touch

Shul – Synagogue

Ta’amei HaMitzvot – Reasons for the commandments

Tefilah - Prayer

Tzniut/tzanaa - Modesty
Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Introduction
Hello. Thank you for ageing to participate in my study. I appreciate your time. The whole interview will take between an hour and an hour and a half, but we can end the conversation at any point in the interview. Before we start, I want to make sure that you agree to have the interview tape-recorded. This will help me to return to our conversation later and make sure that I capture your stories completely. It will also allow me to listen to you closely. You can ask me to stop the recording at any point. Our conversation is confidential; and if I quote you in my work, I will not use your name or any details that may identify who you are. Is this okay with you?

1. Can you share a story or experience you’ve had at school that would help me understand what it means to be a Yehudia student?
2. What non-academic activities do you most commonly engage in at school? Are these activities common at other Jewish Toronto high schools? Are they similar or different from the one’s you do outside of school?
3. Why do boys study Talmud?
4. What Kodesh (Jewish Studies) subject is most prized at Yehudia? Why?
5. What classes are least valued at Yehudia? Why?
6. What kind of things does the ideal Yehudia girl do? Or, What would a girl do at school to be considered the ideal Yehudia girl? Would it be different outside of school? How and in what way?
7. Try to imagine yourself in 10 years – what do you see?
8. Case Study: This paragraph is a reflection from a Yehudia or (boys’ school) graduate.

1. I learnt several important life lessons from my time in (name of boys’ school) (outside the sphere of the classroom of course). An example of one of these lessons is the extreme impressionability of humans and how we adapt our values and personalities to fit in with our surroundings (which I feel like an evolutionary trait). It seems that the majority of people either knowing or unknowingly tend to latch onto the values and standards of their community and surroundings as a means of fitting in. While religious dogma and observance are good examples of this phenomenon an even better example is basketball at (name of boys’ school). Basketball at (name of boys’ school) generally consists of ten sweaty boys in polo shirts and Naot shoes rigorously trying to throw a ball into a hoop. On an objective level this is nothing more than an arbitrary game which at the very most should provide children with a fun and healthy activity to help them find something kosher to do with their spare time (“spare time” in (name of boys’ school)’s case is 8:30am to about 5:00pm on your average day). Basketball at (name of boys’ school) was more than a sport, it was a Weltanschauung, a way of
life. Those who were skilled at throwing the ball into the hoop were respected and somewhat deified, and while it was still very much possible to be popular and cool if you were not good at basketball, it certainly didn’t help your case if you didn't know how to dribble a ball. We would play basketball during class, during breaks, during practise, during intramurals, during official games and after school. I found it funny that immediately after graduating and moving onto yeshiva those who were skilled at basketball garnered much less respect for their talents than, say, the boys who were very smart, funny, nice or good at getting girls. It seems that very few students ever really cared about the sport but once placed in an environment where this was given high value having a nice jump shot started to matter. It’s always important to stop yourself and think about the things you really care about and believe in in life versus the things you do just to gain the respect of others.

2. A strong memory I have in Yehudia occurred in both grade nine and twelve. We had a program in our school called the "Big sister-Little sister" program. This program was essentially created for the purpose of welcoming freshmen and giving them a 'buddy' in the school to whom they could look up to and ask questions. A twelfth grader would be paired with a ninth grader and they would be given time during the start of the program to talk, go out for a drink, exchange e-mails and/or phone numbers etc. This program was significant for me when I was the 'Big' sister in grade twelve as opposed to when I was the 'Little' sister in grade nine because when I was in grade nine the older sisters assigned to me didn't really put much thought or care towards truly speaking with me, whereas when I was in grade twelve I tried to give my assigned little sister a lot of attention, not just on the day of the program but also throughout the year. I feel as though I have received more from this program when I was in grade twelve because it has created a lasting friendship. To this day (6 years after high school) I am very close to my 'little' sister and although we live on opposite ends of the world, we try to make time to catch up and be present in each other's lives as much as possible. (Additionally, my 'little' sister was a fantastic 'big' sister when she was in grade twelve, and hopefully the trend of good 'big' sisters will continue).

a. Does it represent your experience of the school? If only in part, which part? Please explain.
b. What other observation can you make about this persons experience at school?

9. Please read the following paragraph.
a. Does it reflect a sentiment you experience, or one common amongst Modern Orthodox girls? Please explain.

10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your experience at school?

11. Do you have any questions for me that I may be able to answer?

Thank you again for spending this time with me and for sharing your experiences. I am very grateful for your participation. I will transcribe the tape of our interview and will
send you the transcription, so that you can review it and let me know if there are things you’d like to correct or clarify.

**Appendix B**

*Guidelines for Video Project*

The goal of this project is for you to help an outsider like me understand what it means to be a student at Yehudia. The simple question I hope you will answer through your video, each group in its own way, is, “What does it mean to be a Yehudia student?” You are not being graded on this work – it is simply a way of learning about the way in which the members of this group similarly, and perhaps differently, understand their environment and religious identities.

You will be given a Kodak video-camera to use. There are two, so we will create a schedule for groups to have one week block to film and upload their data on school or home computers for editing. I am always available to answer technological problems.

After everyone has completed their videos, we will watch them together over a few classes. Each student will be provided with a few guiding questions to think critically (and that does not mean negatively) about their friends videos, after which we will discuss our observations together.
Appendix C

Student Informed Consent Letter

November 21, 2011

To the Grade Twelve Students at Yehudia

You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study on the way female students in a Modern Orthodox school understand and make sense of their religious identities. Modern Orthodox education can be challenging and creative, as it advocates engagement with both traditional and modern subjects and values, at once offering independence yet adhering to authority, which result in students having to negotiate between the two. I am interested in understanding how that process transpires from the student’s perspective, and how girls navigate these tensions. Yehudia is noted in the community for the religious and academic success of its graduate, thus making it an ideal site within which to study how this educational process unfolds.

This study is being carried out at Yehudia in (city name) under the supervision of Professor John Portelli, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

Any grade twelve students who wish to participate in the study are welcome to. For those who choose to participate, a pre-interview questionnaire will be provided initially to collect background information. This will be followed by a one-on-one, face-to-face interview of approximately one to one and a half hours. During the interview you will be asked questions about the subjects, personalities and experiences at school that have impacted you and shaped your religious outlook. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and the reasons you believe the things you do. After the interview, I will write brief notes that will be used to assist me in remembering the surroundings of the interview, or any thoughts or observations that occurred to me during the process of the interview. The interview will happen in a publicly visible and accessible space in the school, but it will be conducted privately.

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, and communities cannot be identified. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.
You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of you as a student, nor will it be shared with anyone in a manner that would allow you to be identified, as I do not have any role, official or unofficial, at Yehudia. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. You will receive no payment for your participation.

I will also be sitting in on grade twelve classes throughout the year. Some of these classes will be recorded, but data will only be gathered from those students who consent to participate in the study. I will take notes during these classes.

I will be asking participants to create a five (5) minute video project in groups of three or four in response to the question, “What does it mean to be an Yehudia student?” These videos will be shown to classmates who have consented to participate in the study for their observations and feedback about how each group has answered the question in their video. This will be run as part of a classroom activity directed by the classroom teacher. Only students who have signed consent form can appear in the videos. It will only be shown in the classroom to students who have consented to participate in the research project. As such, no one outside of the class will see them aside from me, the researcher. Only people who have signed a confidentiality agreement and appear in the video will be mentioned in the written version of this research. Of course you will not be mentioned by name, but through the use of a pseudonym.

The benefit to you from my study is indirect, but I believe that the benefit is an important one. My goal is ultimately to contribute to the improvement of Modern Orthodox education through a better understanding of how students understanding their religious education.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (my home phone number) or at raficashman@gmail.com. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Portelli at 416-978-1277. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Rafael Cashman
PhD Candidate
OISE/University of Toronto
Telephone: (my #)

Dr. Jon Portelli
Theory and Policy Studies in Education Professor,
OISE/University of Toronto
Telephone: 416-978-1277.
By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Student Consent

Name: _____________________________________
School: _____________________________
Signed: ____________________________________
Date: ______________________________

Parent/Guardian Consent
I have read this form and I give _______________ permission to participate in this study.

Name of parent/guardian _________________
Signature of parent/guardian _________________
Date ________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____
Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: _____
Please keep a copy of this form for your records.
Appendix D

Administrator Informed Consent Letter

November 21, 2011

Attention: Headmaster

Dear Headmaster,

I am a graduate student in the Curriculum, Teacher and Learning Department at OISE/UT and am currently planning a research project that will involve the students at Yehudia. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent.

The purpose of this study is to explore the way female students in a Modern Orthodox school understand and make sense of their religious identities. You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study on the way female students in a Modern Orthodox school understand and make sense of their religious identities. Modern Orthodox education can be challenging and creative, as it advocates engagement with both traditional and modern subjects and values, at once offering independence yet adhering to authority, which result in students having to negotiate between the two. I am interested in understanding how that process transpires from the student’s perspective, and how girls navigate these tensions. Yehudia is noted in the community for the religious and academic success of its graduate, thus making it an ideal site within which to study how this educational process unfolds.

The study involves the use of a pre-interview questionnaire, individual interviews in which participants will be asked about the subjects, personalities and experiences at school that have impacted them and shaped their religious outlook. They will also be asked to create a five-minute video about what it means to be a Yehudia student. They will be well informed about the nature of the study and their participation, including the assurance that they may withdraw at any time. In addition, they may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm. Participants will receive no payment for their participation.

The information gathered from both questionnaires and interviews will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools and communities cannot be identified. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

If you agree, please sign the letter below and return it to me. If you have any questions,
please feel free to contact me at (my phone number) or at raficashman@gmail.com. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Dr. Portelli at 416-978-1277. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Rafi Cashman

_____________________
Administrator’s signature

_____________________
Date
Appendix E

Teacher Informed Consent Letter

November 21, 2011

Dear Yehudia Teacher,

You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study on the way female students in a Modern Orthodox school understand and make sense of their religious identities. Modern Orthodox education can be challenging and creative, as it advocates engagement with both traditional and modern subjects and values, at once offering independence yet adhering to authority, which result in students having to negotiate between the two. I am interested in understanding how that process transpires from the student’s perspective, and how girls navigate these tensions. Yehudia is noted in the community for the religious and academic success of its graduate, thus making it an ideal site within which to study how this educational process unfolds.

This study is being carried out at Yehudia under the supervision of Professor John Portelli, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

Any grade twelve students who wish to participate in the study are welcome to, as are any teachers. For those who choose to participate, a pre-interview questionnaire will be provided initially to collect background information. This will be followed by a face-to-face, one-on-one interview of approximately one to one and half-hours. During the interview you will be asked questions about the school, and how you see the students in their religious development as Modern Orthodox Jews. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and the reasons you believe the things you do. After the interview, I will write brief notes that will be used to assist me in remembering the surroundings of the interview, or any thoughts or observations that occurred to me during the process of the interview. The interview will happen in a publicly visible and accessible space in the school, but it will be conducted privately.

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, and communities cannot be identified. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.
You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of you as a student, nor will it be shared with anyone in a manner that would allow you to be identified, as I do not have any role, official or unofficial, at Yehudia. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. You will receive no payment for your participation.

I will also be sitting in on grade twelve classes throughout the year, at your permission. Some of these classes will be recorded, again, with your permission, but data will only be gathered from those students who consent to participate in the study. I will take notes during these classes.

I will be asking student participants to create a five (5) minute video project in groups of three or four in response to the question, “What does it mean to be an Yehudia student?” These videos will be shown to classmates who have consented to participate in the study for their observations and feedback about how each group has answered the question in their video.

The benefit to you from my study is indirect, but I believe that the benefit is an important one. My goal is ultimately to contribute to the improvement of Modern Orthodox education through a better understanding of how students understanding their religious education.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (my phone number or at raficashman@gmail.com. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Portelli at 416-978-1277. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Rafael Cashman
PhD Candidate
OISE/University of Toronto
Telephone: (my #)
Email: raficashman@gmail.com

Dr. Jon Portelli
Theory and Policy Studies in Education Professor,
OISE/University of Toronto
Telephone: 416-978-1277.
Email: john.portelli@utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.
Name: _____________________________________
School: _________________________________
Signed: _________________________________
Date: _________________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: _____
Please keep a copy of this form for your records.