Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism:
A Feminist Analysis

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This paper explores the meaning of gender-role difference by comparing and contrasting the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of women who have “returned” to orthodox Judaism (baalot teshuva) to some of the current theoretical perspectives in feminist scholarship. Preliminary findings of in-depth interviews with 50 baalot teshuva suggest that, while the affirmation of gender difference clearly leads to a focus on femininity, mothering, and domesticity, it does not necessarily result in a reaffirmation of patriarchal values and practices.

The growing interest in the New Right and fundamentalist religions in the closing decades of the 20th century has important implications for the study of women, gender roles, and the family. Such “turns to the right” and “returns to biblical religion” share certain assumptions about the sexes. They hold not only as self-evident but as biologically true the belief that women are emotionally, psychologically, and temperamentally different from men and that such differences manifest themselves in a clear-cut division of labor between the sexes. Interestingly, at the same time that gender differences have been “rediscovered” by those attracted to conservative movements, there also have been some twists in contemporary feminist discourse on the issue of gender difference which some have labeled as “reactionary” and “conservative.” However, such labeling may assume more understanding about the experience or meaning of “reactionary” than is readily apparent. For instance, preliminary findings of in-depth interviews with 50 baalot teshuva (women who have “returned” to orthodoxy, the most traditional and fundamentalist arm of Judaism) suggest that, while the reaffirmation of gender difference clearly leads to a focus on femininity, mothering, and domesticity, it does not necessarily result in a reaffirmation of patriarchal values and practices.

In this paper I wish to explore the meaning of gender-role difference by comparing and contrasting the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of the baalot teshuva under study to some of the current theoretical perspectives in feminist scholarship. To appreciate this apparent paradoxical juxtaposition, it is important to know something about the history of feminist theory. I begin with an overview of some of the trends and reversals in contemporary feminist thinking.

A BRIEF AND SELECTIVE OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THINKING

The past 2½ decades of feminist discourse have raised our academic and public consciousness about the meaning and measure of gender-role difference in contemporary society. The first wave of contemporary feminist scholars addressed the scientific bases for gender-role differences by arguing that sex differences were more a byproduct of the power relations in a patriarchally organized society than a result of biology (De Beauvoir, 1953; Mitchell, 1973; Millett, 1970; Janeway, 1971). Referring to this early period of thinking, Eisenstein writes: “Feminist analysis
had revealed that the traditional celebration of women’s ‘difference’ from men concealed a conviction of women’s inferiority and an intention to keep women relatively powerless. Thus difference from men meant inequality and continued oppression for women’’ (1980:xvii). At the heart of these early analyses was a concern for the political uses of difference.

Such concerns spurred these feminists to search for theories that either minimized sex differences or showed how sex differences were primarily a by-product of socially created gender roles, not biology. Feminists of this period made an important distinction between sex and gender. Arguing that gender is learned through socialization processes begun in early childhood and, therefore, that female and male attributes were neither bred nor immutable, they also recast structural-functional models of the family. Their most common method was to pursue historic and economic analyses in order to show how the modern family was a cumulative creation of changes in technology and production (see especially, Mitchell, 1973; Millett, 1970; Janeway, 1971). Thus, they dramatically challenged the concept of the family as a natural biological entity, functional in some ‘‘timeless’’ way, and made explicit the societal mechanisms whereby we create and reinforce gender-role difference.

Catharine Stimpson has referred to this stage of recent feminist history as a ‘‘minimalist’’ period. Curiously, whether intentional or not, the minimalists’ distaste for difference and emphasis on the universality or commonality of women’s experiences led to a focus on women as a ‘‘generic grouping.’’ In academe this focus legitimated a new field of inquiry—women’s studies. It also led to a radical shift in thinking among contemporary feminists. As Eisenstein phrases it: ‘‘Now, far from seeking to minimize women’s differences from men, feminist scholars were asserting their importance as a legitimate and even a crucial concern for women” (1980:xvii). At the heart of these concerns spurred these feminists to search for theories that either minimized sex differences or showed how sex differences were primarily a by-product of socially created gender roles, not biology. Feminists of this period made an important distinction between sex and gender. Arguing that gender is learned through socialization processes begun in early childhood and, therefore, that female and male attributes were neither bred nor immutable, they also recast structural-functional models of the family. Their most common method was to pursue historic and economic analyses in order to show how the modern family was a cumulative creation of changes in technology and production (see especially, Mitchell, 1973; Millett, 1970; Janeway, 1971). Thus, they dramatically challenged the concept of the family as a natural biological entity, functional in some ‘‘timeless’’ way, and made explicit the societal mechanisms whereby we create and reinforce gender-role difference.

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Maximalists championed a woman-centered analysis. In the family literature, for example, measures of happiness, satisfaction, and marital success were reanalyzed in light of the experiences of women, not men. In sociology several examples suffice to remind us of the radical potential and theoretical impact such a change in focus portends. Jessie Bernard’s ‘‘The Paradox of the Happy Marriage’’ provides an early instance of a transition to a woman-centered analysis. In this ground-breaking article, subtitled ‘‘Happy or Reconciled?’’ Bernard asks: ‘‘. . . could it be that women report themselves as happy because they are oversocialized, overculturated, or too closely integrated into the norms of society? . . . Are they confusing adjustment with happiness?’’ (1971:156). Bernard concludes that there are two marriages for every one union—his and hers. Only from ‘‘her’’ perspective could Bernard deduce a different and potentially damaging experience for women if the theories and measures of family dynamics remained based on male norms and definitions.

Implicit in Bernard’s work was a critique of the androcentric biases in the family sociology literature, what historically might be seen as an important oversight in early minimalist thinking: a critique of the male norms that dominated each discipline and, therefore, determined what theoretical questions were asked (or not asked) and how the answers were then evaluated. In her now-classic article, ‘‘Depression in Middle-Aged Women,’’ Bart showed that once investigations are undertaken from a woman’s perspective, the androcentric biases in structural-functional models of the family are clearly revealed. ‘‘My data show,’’ Bart writes, ‘‘that it is the women who assume the traditional feminine role—who are housewives, who stay married to their husbands, who are not overly aggressive, in short, who ‘buy’ the traditional norms—who respond with depression when their children leave—even the MMPI masculine-feminine scores for women at one hospital were one half a standard deviation more feminine than the mean’’ (1971:184).

Writers like Bernard and Bart were stressing more than the dangers of gender-role socialization for women; they dramatized the inadequacy of theories that did not include women’s experiences. What would happen if theories were reformulated to include women? What would it be like if women were at the center of the analysis of family life, marital happiness, theories of old age, life-cycle change?

Maximalist thinking may be seen as a logical outcome of the minimalist focus on women as a legitimate unit of analysis, for such a focus encouraged a critique of masculinity and a search for the androcentric biases in theoretical thinking. With masculinity under investigation, Eisenstein notes, thinking was reversed: ‘‘. . . from this point of view,’’ she writes, ‘‘maleness was the difference, or. . . . men were the Other’’ (1980:xix). If men were the other, then all that had been culturally and historically associated with them (for instance, competition, excessive individualism, aggression, impersonality, materialism)
could be viewed from a new critical perspective. An understanding that the theories and methods of social science, science, and perhaps even the whole Western tradition of thought were based upon male thinking and male normative patterns emerged from the work of some of these new-wave writers (Miller, 1976; Rich, 1976; Keller, 1978).

Eisenstein characterizes the impact of this new theoretical focus as an attempt not "to minimize the polarizing between masculine and feminine," but "to isolate and to define those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of strength and power for women..." (1983:xii). "But," she continues, "in the subsequent development of this line of argument in the work of Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, and others, some of these original insights have been lost. Instead, a potentially reactionary concept has begun to emerge, that of the intrinsic moral superiority of women" (1983:xiii). For Eisenstein, the reactionary component of this extreme, maximalist position is that it implies a theoretical shift in thinking: from woman as agent, actor, and subject to woman as eternal essence; from the social construction of gender to a sexual dimorphism based on an intrinsic moral superiority of women; a reification of the very theoretical issues that many feminists believe to be the source of female oppression. Eisenstein concludes that feminist theory is at an impasse.

I do not believe that feminist theory is at an impasse. Only if we polarize minimalistic and maximalist perspectives are we left with no theoretical direction; and while, to some degree, the most recent discourse in feminist thinking and the baalot teshuva’s "return" to orthodoxy may be "reactionary," the term does not fully capture the "return" experience, nor does it exhaust the political and theoretical interpretations inherent in maximalist thinking. To help elucidate some continuities with the past and to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of recent feminist discourse, I present some of my initial findings about women who have returned to Orthodox Judaism. I wish to draw parallels between these women's understanding of their family and gender roles and the current maximalist perspective in feminist thinking. There are some striking similarities. Moreover, the empirical data may illustrate how behavior is much more complicated than the sets of abstractions used to explain it.

METHODOLOGY AND SOCIODEMOGRAPHY OF THE POPULATION STUDIED

A return to Orthodox Judaism has a very special meaning both in Judaism and in the latter half of the 20th century. I am using the word "return" in the broadest sense, to refer to women who have found their way to orthodoxy as adults (women who have consciously chosen this style of life). The term for such people in Hebrew is baalei teshuva (masters of return). They are persons who have grown up or lived outside the traditional Jewish beliefs and practices of orthodoxy and who have found their way to or "returned" to Orthodox Judaism. In my own work I have defined the baal teshuva (singular form of the baalei teshuva) and, more specifically, the baalat teshuva (female singular form) in two ways: as a woman who currently is practicing and/or believes in Orthodox Judaism and who is more traditional in her practice/belief than her parents, or as a woman who currently is practicing and/or believes in orthodoxy who had lapsed in that belief/practice for some period of time. Orthodoxy is the most traditional arm of Judaism, demanding adherence to ancient laws and particular rabbinic translations of those laws and customs. Orthodoxy was measured in two ways: strict observance of all the Sabbath laws and strict observance of all the laws of "kashruth" (Jewish dietary laws).

Several methods were used to locate respondents. Interviews with leading rabbis in a large Northeastern city helped to define the major baal teshuva communities. One major community and two smaller ones were identified. In order to achieve a broad representation, interviewees were initially located through rabbis in each of these communities. Once within the communities, the referral method or "snowball" technique was used. Interviewees were asked for names and addresses of people they knew about, rather than friends' names or people they knew personally (although such names were also permissible). In this way the population under study was more than a network of friends but also a sample of people who, for religious reasons, live in easily identified communities. Because pretest sampling indicated that baalot teshuva entering their late adolescence and early adulthood in the late 1960s and early 1970s seemed more similar in lifestyle patterns to the "hippies" and "flower children" of that period than were baalot teshuva entering adolescence and early adulthood approximately seven or eight years later, purposive sampling was employed to fill categories with equal numbers of women under and over the age of 30 (the women ranged in age from 21 to 42). Of particular interest is whether interpretations of family and gender-role arrangements might differ by each group's slightly different historic experiences with the women's movement and different demograph-
ic trends. Interviewing was complete when no new names were generated and when equal numbers of respondents were obtained in different cohort groups.

Fifty currently married baalot teshuva (female plural) were interviewed over a two-year period. The interviews began with a number of predefined topics but were unstructured and in-depth. The interviews focused on the history of the women’s return to orthodoxy; their beliefs, practices, knowledge, and feelings about orthodoxy; their current familial lifestyle; and their views about gender roles. Individuals were encouraged to converse at will following key questions and probes. The interviews lasted from 2½ to 5½ hours, with an average of slightly over 3 hours. To complete interviews, 10 subjects were interviewed twice for a total of eight hours each. A 10-page demographicic questionnaire was left with each respondent along with a stamped envelope for its return.

For the majority of women, the return is somewhat similar to Melton’s (1983) profile of those entering new religious cults. Melton describes those entering cults as fairly well educated, white, middle class, college age or slightly older, experiencing a transitional stage of life. The return, especially for women 30 years or older in this study, closely matches the profile Janet Aviad presents of the Americans interviewed in her Israeli study of baalei teshuva (1983). For instance, except for 2 of the 25 women over 30 in this study, all had had some experience with drugs and/or Christian religious groups and/or countercultural movements (civil rights, SDS, communal living, etc.). Ten had had some experience with transcendental meditation (TM), a yoga discipline based on the teachings of Maharishi. Eight were vegetarians and still had a great deal of interest in and/or sold macrobiotic foods. All, at the time of their return, were experiencing a transitional stage of life, a personal crisis (death of parent, loss of a romantic attachment, divorce, or a major illness). The age of return among these women ranged from 26–32 years of age. At the time of interviewing, most had established their return for over five years and were unmarried at the time of their return. In contrast to women under the age of 30, this group of women were more likely to have interrupted their lifestyles abruptly and to have immersed themselves totally in some Jewish setting, generally an Hasidic community. For the most part, these over-30 women met the Aviad definition of the contemporary baal teshuva—they had grown up or lived outside the framework of traditional Jewish belief and practice.

The 25 women under 30 years of age had slightly different patterns of return. They were less likely to have had experience with other religious movements, drugs, or countercultural movements. None had been involved in any political movements. Their return to orthodoxy ranged between 18–24 years of age. All were unmarried at the time of their return. The average length of time since their return was 2.5 years. Unlike the older baalot teshuva in this sample, this younger group was better educated religiously. In general, their return to orthodoxy was marked by no special crisis or dramatic event but rather by their claims for a growing need for something “divine,” “absolute,” and/or “certain” in their lives.

Other demographic features suggest that these baalot teshuva are squarely within a middle-class socioeconomic category. The combined average income earned for the 50 families under study was $32,000 a year. Only 6 of the 50 women had earned less than a bachelor’s degree, while 3 were working on master’s degrees and 17 had at least a master’s degree, with 5 of these 17 having professional degrees (two lawyers and three PhD’s). All of the PhD’s were in the social sciences. A little over one-third of the baalot teshuva work (17), but only those with advanced degrees work in what might be classified as male-dominated professions (e.g., law, university teaching, executive director). All of the seven respondents who work full-time have the equivalent of a master’s degree or better; and among those with Masters, all—except for two computer analysts—are in female-dominated occupations.

The average number of children for those working was 2.9 (three had no children); for those not working, the average was 3.2 (five had no children). All of the working women described their work patterns as suited to the flexibility they needed in order to live an orthodox religious lifestyle. This is reflected in the husbands’ work patterns as well. While only seven of the husbands had not been trained in science- or math-related careers, almost three-fourths were in occupations other than those for which they had been trained, or were in the process of retraining. Those retrained or retraining were in the following range of occupational choices: computer analysts, religious school teachers, real estate brokers, small private businessmen, clinical practitioners. The flexibility needed to maintain dietary laws, the many holidays, and the Sabbath encourage both men and women to take part-time jobs or jobs wherein personal autonomy and decision making is high.

**EXPERIENCING ORTHODOXY**

Despite age and some demographic differences,
content analyses of the interview material reveal certain persistent themes. In retelling their stories of return, women reported a common experience: that their lives had been spiritually empty and without meaning before their return. The meaninglessness of modern living became a euphemism for specific issues, most commonly expressed in what these women saw as a cultural ambivalence and confusion toward women, toward women's sexuality, and toward family and gender roles. All women expressed some concern about the loss of boundaries in marital, familial, and sexual relations. Older women spoke freely about their poor heterosexual relationships prior to their return and especially about their relationships to men unwilling to make lasting commitments. As one woman explained:

There I was, 25 years of age. I had had my fill of casual sexual relationships, drugs, communal living. I looked at myself and said: What will I be like at 40 years of age? An aging hippie with no roots and maybe just a history of bad relationships? I wanted something true and lasting.

Younger women were more likely to bemoan the high divorce rate and the seemingly high rate of adultery making to their points.

Almost to a woman the baalot teshuva in this study believe in clear and persistent differences between the sexes. They affirm gender differentiation and celebrate traditional feminine qualities, particularly those associated with mothering. They assert an unambiguous "profamily" stance based on strong assertions that the family, like the spiritual, is essentially their realm. They reject Western values for both men and women that focus on the material rather than the spiritual. They see religious values and, therefore, the normative structure of their communities, as consonant with the "light" and nurturance they define as essentially female.

Passivity, which they associate with femininity, is a celebrated virtue in the religious world. It is equated with infinite capacity to receive divine understanding. Indeed, they describe orthodoxy as "feminine in principle" (see Handelman, 1984). That is, they correlate that which is associated with the female in orthodoxy as also associated with the spiritual and sacred meaning of life. It is in Judaism, they claim, that they have found their identities as women. One woman elaborated on this by suggesting that she did not define femininity by negating or rejecting masculinity but rather by defining it on her own terms. She claims:

By establishing my separateness from others, I am not only defined as a Jew but as a woman. . . . It is not because I am not a man that I am a woman; it is because I am who I am independently. I never wanted to be like a man, nor have I ever wanted to be what they (men) say they are. What I mean is this: I don't want to end up defining myself as a woman by negating or rejecting society's view of me. I want to define it as it feels right and real to me. You know I think it is the first time in my life I have felt really good about being a woman.

A key reason for return among these women was to search for meaning in their lives. When probed about what this meant, a majority responded that, apart from the spirituality they craved, Orthodox Judaism provided a dignity to the lives they led as mothers and wives; that it made holy—and, therefore, meaningful—even the most mundane and natural of their activities. One woman phrased it in this way:

Orthodoxy provides a spirituality to life which gives meaning and direction to all my activities . . . the practical everyday things are made holy . . . even our sexual relations are done under the watchful eye of ha-shem (Yiddish reference to God) . . . it makes spiritual even the most physical acts of life.

Another woman stated it this way:

All the "mitzvot" (commandments) that women must do surround their relationship to the family; the lighting of the Sabbath candles brings light to the family; the baking of the challah (Sabbath bread) is related to women's nurturing (feeding) role; and finally obeying taharat hamishpacha (family purity laws surrounding menstruation and sexuality) give our most natural lives a spiritual and holy quality.

The specialness of woman and the importance of her sphere of activity was stressed throughout the interviews and often juxtaposed to a rather rigid conception of what was described as feminism. For the majority of these women, feminism is defined as the women's liberation movement primarily focused on dismissing differences between men and women and on the world of work, where equal pay is the most important issue. In general, these women felt they had gained through their orthodoxy—and especially through their roles in the family—a new dignity, a dignity they felt most contemporary feminists disregarded and devalued. Ironically, however, they used feminist rhetoric and foci when describing their lives. This is especially evident in their discussion of the laws of niddah. These laws demand a two-week sexual separation between husband and wife during her menstrual cycle.

Almost all women noted the positive functions of niddah: from claims of increased sexual satisfaction within the marriage ("forced separation increases desire"), to increased time for self ("it
allows me a bed of my own"), to control over one's own sexuality ("I can say 'no' with no pretense of a headache if I wish"). Because these women have to attend intimately to their bodies to engage in sexual activity according to "halacha" (religious law), many speak of an increased awareness and harmony with their bodies they had never known before, as shown in the following typical response:

At this time of the month I am acutely aware of myself; everything is heightened because I am paying attention to what is happening inside me. Later I am checking my body and its discharges each day. Over the years it is building a cycle for me; it's a rhythm that is related to me and my body alone.

While all women enjoyed the rejuvenation and spiritual uplifting of going to the mikvah, not all were uniformly happy about the length of time they were separated from their husbands. Indeed it was length of time—not the practice of niddah itself—about which women complained. Many of the women claimed that the practices of niddah force them and their husbands to learn new forms of communication and, more importantly, to use these newly found skills. "Most men don't know how to talk things out," claims one woman; "but since approximately one-half of my year is spent in niddah, I have found that we are forced to talk about things more and that he has learned to show his love in ways more important than just physical contact." The following quotation captures the general attitude of these baalot teshuva toward one of the three most important laws pertaining to them as Orthodox Jewish women:

I am a child of the liberated generation. Since we are talking about niddah now, I will refer to sexual liberation although I think what I am saying applies to many areas of liberation. For all the sexual freedom I felt in my late adolescence and early adulthood, I can tell you that it was more like sexual exploitation. I felt there were no longer any rules; on what grounds did one decide to say 'no'? If the rule was casual sex and if you engaged in it, on what grounds did one say 'no'? What rules did you use? If you see what I'm saying—without overriding rules or without protection of some sort, the sexual liberation meant that women were free to be exploited more by men. . . . The laws of taharat hamishpacha (family purity laws) make so much sense. For instance, I am not a sex object to my husband; he respects me and respects my sexuality. Because he does not have access to me anytime he wishes, he cannot take me for granted. The separation restores our passion and places the control of it in my hands.

Whether working or not, all the baalot teshuva appreciated the clear and unambiguous feelings in Judaism toward motherhood. All of the women—even those without children—referred to the home as the realm of the female, the realm where her priorities and loyalties belonged. However, this emphasis on motherhood did not negate working nor help with child care. Of the two-thirds not working, all intended to work in the paid labor force at some time in the future. Almost all those without advanced degrees intended to retrain and/or obtain more education before returning to the labor force. Only one woman was outrightly opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment.

Among those who worked, almost half worked full-time. Almost all the women who had children used some form of child care regularly, whether they worked or not. Of those who worked full-time, half had someone living in the household to help with child-care responsibilities.

Perhaps even more interesting are the child-care arrangements that included husbands. Among the women who worked full-time, almost all husbands had some—and, in one case, close to half—of the responsibility for the care of children. An interesting combination of reasons accounts for this situation. Because of their religious commitment to prayer and study, many men create flexibility in their work patterns. Their presence in the home—often during the day—gives them more contact with and often more responsibility for children than husbands who do not work within the home.

The return to orthodoxy for these women has not led inevitably—as it seems to have done for women of the New Christian Right—to the re-establishment of a clear-cut division of labor within the family. For instance, while the baalot teshuva see the family as the female's primary domain, this is reflected in their control of familial and domestic decisions—not necessarily in the performance of domestic chores alone. More importantly, these baalot teshuva maintain that they gain power and dignity from their identification with a sphere that resembles more closely the spiritual community of which they are a part, compared with the larger society that they reject. The baalot teshuva are hostile to a secular world emphasizing material concerns and masculine notions of a healthy economy.

It would be too easy to describe this return among some contemporary women as simply reactionary or only as a search for order, stability, and security in a world bereft of overarching standards. Explanations also must include the effect contemporary familial and gender-role experiences have had on the direction of that search. Indeed, the burgeoning literature on wife abuse,
child abuse, and rape within marriage suggests that not all is well within the modern nuclear family. Neither is everything equal. Pleck’s (1977) work, among others, suggests that both working and nonworking wives and mothers maintain the major responsibility for domestic and child-care activities. From the earliest marital satisfaction literature (Bernard, 1971) to the most recent (Schwartz and Blumstein, 1983), it is clear that communication (sexual and otherwise) is a major problem for middle-class women.

The baalot teshuva argue their choice of lifestyle within a contemporary familial context. They regard orthodoxy—from the laws of niddah to the value and dignity accorded them as wives and mothers—as institutional protection. In this sense they are not dependent upon individual males but upon a theology they believe to be “feminine in principle.” Although the depth of religious commitment among baalot teshuva should not be minimized, the phenomenon of returning also may be an expression of a quest for revalued domesticity, a search for new dimensions of meaning in women’s lives as wives and mothers. By reviving a focus on these roles (roles that every national survey suggests young women intend to play [Herzog et al., 1979]), these women refocus on an area of women’s lives that they claim 20th century feminists have not consistently addressed.

THE BAALOT TESHUVA AND MAXIMALIST FEMINISTS

In a world as highly segregated along gender lines as Orthodox Jewish communities, feminine values assume a new meaning. The baalot teshuva’s entry into that sex-segregated world provides them with a new consciousness about gender difference. In a secular world their difference is seen as inferior and weak; in the religious world it is celebrated as strength. Femininity and that which is associated with it is seen as a positive source of value, not only for the self but for the community as well. From this perspective female qualities are not only normative but central to orthodox living. In this way men become the other.

Similar strains of thinking can be found among maximalist feminists. The woman-centered perspective that gave rise to the maximalist perspective produced a critique of masculinity and a change in attitude toward the value of women’s differences from men. Difference, originally seen as a source of oppression, could now be seen as a source of strength. Eisenstein writes of this turn in feminist thinking as follows: “They were beginning to ask whether ‘masculinity’ was perhaps an outdated, or even dangerous construct” (1980: xix). Only from that perspective could maleness and masculinity lose its centrality and normative force. From a woman-centered focus, men become the other.

Other similarities are also apparent. Like maximalists, baalot teshuva believe in clear and persistent differences between the sexes. Both call into question what Bart and Budinger (1984) call the “shibboleth of liberal feminism,” the idea that equality means sameness. To both the maximalist and the baalot teshuva, equality does not mean the eradication of gender difference but, ironically, a change in the gender hierarchy. For some among both groups, the highest levels of spirituality are reached, if not recognized, through the female body and its experiences (Daly, 1978). In this sense there is a rejection of polarities, particularly that which separates the physical and the spiritual.

The focus on female sexuality (though with radically different conclusions) is also of key importance to both groups. Catharine MacKinnon (cited in Bart and Budinger, 1984:11) notes: “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.” Both feminists and baalot teshuva wish to gain control over their bodies and sexuality from men. Some radical feminists do so by following separatist policies; the baalot teshuva do so by appealing to orthodox laws which they claim give them control over their own sexuality.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE

The dilemma—as originally posed in this brief overview of contemporary feminist thinking—is that the development of an extreme woman-centered analysis leads to a paradox, since woman’s difference—originally seen as a source of subordination—reappears as a source of superiority. For Eisenstein (1983), the extreme response of the maximalist strand of feminist thinking, with its emphasis on “sexual dimorphism” and that which is “uniquely female,” represents a political as well as theoretical reversal in feminist thinking. For her, the creation of a separate and/or self-contained woman’s culture represents a withdrawal from the political struggle to transform patriarchal structures; an end to the social construction of gender; and the loss of woman as agent, actor, and subject.

While such reversals may indeed represent a withdrawal from political struggle, there may be more theoretical latitude than that which is initially apparent. For instance, the acknowledgement of difference need not be only a passive acceptance of that which is “naturally” devalued or
“biologically” inferior; it may constitute—as, for example, with the baalot teshuva—an active reformulation, through the use of symbols, words, and meaning, of a social order that values the feminine. Michele Rosaldo writes of something similar in her discussion of purity and pollution: “The ideas of purity and pollution, so often used to circumscribe female activities, may also be used as a basis for assertions of female solidarity, power, or value” (1974:38).

Indeed, as Eisenstein recognizes in her earlier work, “. . . it is not difference in itself that has been dangerous to women and other oppressed groups, but the political uses to which the idea of difference has been put. The defining of difference has traditionally been linked to the exercise of power, to those who have been in a position to say who is ‘different’” (1980:xxiii). The naming of difference has been challenged and contested by both the baalot teshuva and the maximalist feminists. The latter do it from the strength of a woman-centered analysis, the former from a theology they believe “feminine in principle.” Whether either are successful in these challenges is another issue.

FOOTNOTES

1. In general, while feminists may have different emphases, the term “patriarchy” has come to mean the universal oppression of women by men.

2. In my discussion of feminist theory, I have relied heavily on Hester Eisenstein’s (1983) excellent review and critique of contemporary feminist thinking. While there is no one feminist theory, Eisenstein has located the important themes that have emerged during the course of contemporary theorizing. Other books helpful in piecing together the many strands of feminist thought were: Gordon (1977); Hayden (1981); Keohane et al. (1982); Thorne and Yalom (1982).

3. I have borrowed the terms “minimalist” and “maximalist” from Catharine Stimpson’s keynote address at the Wheaton College Conference on “Balancing the Curriculum” (June 1984).

4. The generated names did not necessarily include women from the same neighborhood, “shule” (synagogue), or Hasidic group. Over 75 new names were generated; upon interviewing, however, some respondents did not meet the baalot teshuva criterion (10) or were no longer baalot teshuva (5). There were only two refusals. The high response rate was matched by the return of 45 out of 50 (90%) mail-out questionnaires left with respondents after the interviews.

5. The American Jewish Committee describes Hasidism this way:

The Hasidic world is one of strict orthodox observance, often involving mystical beliefs and, in varying degrees, insulation from the modern outside world. Hasidim observe not only the letter of Jewish law, but also customs pertaining to life-style, celebration and mode of dress, distinct to themselves or to their particular sect. It is a self-contained world, in which entire communities center around a Rebbe (leader-Rabbi) whose roots are planted in dynasties and whose influence over the lives of his followers goes far beyond matters of Jewish observance. [1982:10]

6. The mikvah is a collection of a special pool of water constructed according to rigid legal specifications; immersion renders ritually clean a person who has become ritually unclean. Until a woman has immersed herself in the mikvah after menstruation, she cannot resume a physical relationship with her husband.

7. The wives whose husbands work partially at home report more paternal interaction with the children and more household responsibilities for husbands.

8. This may be an incorrect assumption, however. See, for instance, Carol Pohli’s work on Moral Majority women (1983).

9. The sticky theoretical point quite relevant to but not explored in this paper is that the valuing of the feminine—when done in a separate sphere by women trying to define their own social and physical space—does not necessarily challenge the power relations and larger societal mechanisms—social, cultural, economic, political—that create and maintain male hegemony. To discover that something is valuable does not necessarily make it socially valuable. The struggle of the kibbutz to maintain egalitarian principles within the larger context of Israeli society highlights this sociological issue. For feminist historians the problem to be addressed is, Will questions of culture substitute for questions of politics? (See, for instance, Feminist Studies 6, Spring 1980.)

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