# Literacy and Power: The Shiyour as a Site of Subordination and Empowerment for Chabad Women

Elite Ben-Yosef


Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2011, pp. 53-74 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
*DOI: 10.1353/jfs.2011.0001*

*JFSR* 27.1 (2011) 53–74

# LITERACY AND POWER

## The *Shiyour* as a Site of Subordination and Empowerment for Chabad Women

*Elite Ben-Yosef*

Once a week, late at night, a group of otherwise very busy Jewish women of the Orthodox Jewish Chabad community leave their children, husbands, and homes to attend a *shiyour*—a religious lesson given by and to adult women. Within a situation of restricted access to literacy, the teachers use specific texts and language to reproduce cultural knowledge regarding group and personal identities. Deconstructing the *shiyour* will demonstrate the function of these literacy events in reiterating group borders and creating social and temporal networks, while covertly serving to uphold the traditional gender hierarchies that allow only men of the community access to public power and formal status positions. Some women, however, manage to turn around this literacy practice into an empowering and equalizing experience.

This article examines the *shiyour* ("lesson" in Hebrew)—an institutionalized arrangement of nonformal education for adult Jewish women in the Chasidic Chabad community.[1] Although much has been written about women and

[1] Chasidism is a branch of Orthodox Judaism which itself is considered the most traditional among the three main streams of contemporary Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform). Orthodox Judaism is divided into roughly two/three variants: Modern Orthodoxy and Ultra-orthodox Judaism (*Charedi*) in which some include Chasidism and others see it as a separate entity (as will be my approach in this paper). Orthodox Jews conduct a lifestyle based on *halacha* (Jewish law) while *Chasidim* and *Charedi* groups are considered to be stricter in adhering to and carrying out religious obligations. They also, to this day, dress in ways that distinguish them from the rest of society. The Chabad sect is one of several such groups within Chasidism (*Chasidut*), which originated in Poland in the eighteenth century. "The early *Chasidim* ('pious ones') expressed their faith through dancing, exuberant prayer and application of daily devotion to all aspects of daily life" (Bonnie Morris, "Agents or Victims of Religious Ideology? Approaches to Locating Chasidic Women in Feminist

Chasidism both in scholarly and popular publications in the past two decades,[2] only a few studies focus on Chasidic women's education[3] and none has approached the *shiyour* from a *literacy perspective, which opens an interesting new lens on the processes and products of this unique institution.*[4]

On its face, a *shiyour* is a voluntarily gathering of a support/discourse group that guides the participating women in constructing their Chasidic identity, helps them make sense of their chosen way of life, and aids them in negotiating its hurdles and boundaries. From a critical sociocultural perspective, however, questions emerge as to the function of these lessons and their relationship to agency, gender divisions, and the distribution of social capital and power among community members: Who is teaching whom and what is, in actuality, being

---

Study," in *New World Chasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Chasidic Jews in America*, ed. Janet S. Belcove-Shalin [Albany: SUNY Press, 1995], 15). They emerged as a reaction to the elitist hegemony of scholarship of the orthodox rabbinical academies and attracted the poor and working-class Jews who could, through membership in these groups, engage in redemptive processes of study and prayer despite their inferior literacy and lack of leisure time for prolonged study. The Chasidic sects differ from each other according to the town in Europe and the specific charismatic leader—*Rebbe*—with whom they and their ancestors are associated (the Chabad *Chasidim* are associated with the city of Luvov in Poland and are also called the Lubavitch *Chasidim*). With time, the Chasidic groups became dynastic courts with leadership passing down to the *Rebbe's* heirs, although currently the Chabad *Chasidim* do not have a living *Rebbe* since Rabbi Schneerson passed away in 1994. All sects adhere to similar ideology but differ marginally in customs, traditions, dress codes and ritualistic behaviors. Chabad *Chasidim* are known for their worldwide outreach and proselytizing (Morris, "Agents or Victims?").

[2] Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, *New World Chasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Chasidic Jews in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ari L. Goldman, "Jewish Women's Scholarly Gain," *New York Times*, August 2, 1992, 4A: 24; Debra R. Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), Debra R. Kaufman, "Engendering Orthodoxy: Newly Orthodox Women and Hasidism," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Chasidim*, 135–60; Bonnie Morris, "Agents or Victims of Religious Ideology? Approaches to Locating Chasidic Women in Feminist Study," in ibid., 161–80, Bonnie J. Morris, *Lubavicher Women in America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004); Samantha M. Shapiro, "Keeper of the Flame: The Paradox of the Rabbi's Wife," *New York Times Magazine*, September 9, 2001, 127–31; and Rivkah Slonim, *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006).

[3] Tamar El-Or, "Are They Like Their Grandmothers? A Paradox of Literacy in the Life of Ultraorthodox Jewish Women," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 61–81, Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), Tamar El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity among Young Orthodox Women* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002): and Eldad Weil, "The Beginning of the Women's Era: Women and Femininity in the Writings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," *Akdamot* (2008): 61–85. In Hebrew: Rivka Zakutinsky and Yaffa L. Gottlieb, *Around Sara's Table* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

[4] A note on spelling: all terms associated with Chabad, *Chasidut*, and *Chasidim* are interchangeably spelled in the literature as Habad, *Hasidut*, and *Hasidim*.

taught? Who determines the curriculum and what does it mean? What motivates participants to attend and pursue these lessons within their very limited free time? What power relations does this educational event enact and reproduce? What identities does it create (through discourses, language use, actions, and tools)? What are the practical and ideological (open and concealed) purposes of the lessons? What are the outcomes and consequences of this literacy practice for the students and the community?

This *descriptive* presentation draws from my participation/observation in a series of *shiyourim* (plural) throughout one year as well as several follow-up meetings *with* Chabad women in the New York area. The scholarship focuses on social, cultural, historical, and political processes related to literacy in general and to the *shiyour* in particular. Analysis of the uses and consequences of literacy in this specific context and a deconstruction of the texts involved (printed, oral, and behavioral) found the *shiyour* to be a multipurpose site for the construction and reconfirmation of the Jewish/Chabad identities of the participating women and for reproducing traditional gender and power relationships, or "soft dominance" within the community.[5] Interestingly, it was also found to be a site where Chabad women find resources for personal empowerment. As the women accept their limited access to vernacular literacy as well as their concomitant subordinate position to males within their community, some manage to use this same literacy to create a new, "third space" within which they assume agency and attain status and power of their own.[6]

## A *Shiyour*

Mona was sitting upright in the middle of the big living room, her back to the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. She was in her midthirties, elegantly dressed in a long skirt, a long-sleeved blouse buttoned all the way up to her neck, her head covered by a fashionable wig.[7] Both hands were resting gently on a closed book in her lap. Her voice was soft but carried throughout the room as there was not a sound to interfere or compete with it. The audience of women was attentive and quiet; even the hostess's two young daughters who kept entering and leaving the room, climbing in and out of their mother's lap, did so quietly. An aura of respect, almost reverence, for the speaker's words and knowledge she was imparting suffused the space.

[5] Carolyn Betensky, "The Prestige of the Oppressed: Symbolic Capital in a Guilt Economy," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture*, ed. N. Brown and I. Szeman (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

[6] Kris Gutierrez, "Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space," *Reading Research Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2008): 148–64.

[7] All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants. Regarding Mona's clothing, it is traditional in that it covers the body as well as the natural hair, hence the wig. This way of dressing is aligned with *tzniut* (modesty), an essential concept in Orthodox Judaism.

Mona was giving a *shiyour* in Chasidism to a group of women. This specific lesson was part of a series given on Thursday nights, between 9 and 10 PM, in a home belonging to a family of Chabad *Chasidim i*n a suburb of New York City. That night's audience started out with about fifteen women of different ages and more women joined as the evening progressed—some even walked in a few minutes before the class was over, as if the fact of showing up was important in itself. The women who attended the *shiyourim* were usually *ba'alot tshuva* ("returning Jewish women," those who had decided to join Chabad as adults), many were college educated or professionals, or both. Most of the women were local or from nearby towns, but one Thursday night, the speaker drove all the way from Boston to teach the class. She brought her ten-month-old baby with her, since she was still breast-feeding, but had left at home her husband and their other children.[8]

Teaching a *shiyour* is unpaid community service. The teachers are knowledgeable and experienced women from the general Chabad community, who at other times are *shiyourim* students.[9] The Chabad teachers are *shluchot* (emissaries) of the Lubavitcher *Rebbe* (Rabbi Schneerson, the late spiritual leader of this group) and their compensation is fulfilling the *Rebbe*'s command of educating women of the community.[10]

"None of us are in this for ourselves," said Neomi, the homeowner and organizer of these particular *shiyourim*, who invited me to the gatherings. Invitation is by word of mouth and through fliers posted at local synagogues, but *shiyourim* are open to any woman wishing to participate. Before a lesson begins and after the speaker has finished, conversation ensues and refreshments are served. But the lesson itself is a formal lecture and seldom is there any interaction between the teacher and the audience, except for the asking and answering of clarifying questions. In the lessons I observed during the first year, students and teachers talked about but did not actively use texts (other lessons may employ direct reading from texts as described by Rivka Zakutinsky and Yaffa Gott-

[8] Most of the women attending were married with children, most between twenty-five and forty-five years old. But at times, an older woman would attend and once a younger woman came to a few sessions. She had just joined Chabad and was engaged to a community member.

[9] Infrequently, teachers can be (male) rabbis.

[10] The word *shlucha* was used by the women themselves and also appears on the Chabad site, http://www.chabad.org/global/about/article_cdo/aid/244373/jewish/The-Emissary.htm. From headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, Chabad has sent approximately 4,000 emissary families to major cities around the world, spreading their version of Judaism (www.Chabad.org). Every Chabad member has a double mission in life as decreed by the late *Rebbe*—to fulfill their obligations according to Jewish law and to be a *shliach/shlucha* (emissary) reaching out and trying to bring back lost Jewish souls.

lieb[11] and as I witnessed in a different setting where photocopies of the *Rebbe*'s writings in Yiddish were given out and referred to).[12]

Procedurally, a *shiyour* should include *Torah* (study of a sanctified text), prayer, and *tzedakah* (charity). After the lesson at Neomi's home, we read aloud together from the Book of Psalms preceded by a calling of names of the women the participants knew were ill. This reading was considered a prayer for the complete recovery of those mentioned. Before leaving, everyone deposited coins in a charity box.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Critical Sociocultural Theory*

Appropriating a critical sociocultural theory framework[13] coupled with a New Literacy Studies approach,[14] this study focuses on literacy as a social activity located in the space between thought and text and carried out in interactions between people at specific times and places.[15] Within this framework, the *shiyour* is a literacy practice (the basic unit of literacy theory) connecting people to one another through reading.[16] Literacy practices include shared cognitions, ideologies, and sociocultural identities, and are shaped by rules regarding the distribution of texts: who is allowed access to them and to their reproduction.

Literacy practices evolve, are shaped, are informed and affected by the physical and ideological contexts within which they are used. They are historically situated, embedded in social institutions and power relationships, and rooted in technologies within various institutional contexts for specific social

[11] Zakutinsky and Gottlieb, *Around Sara's Table*.

[12] I am a friend and was a neighbor of Neomi's. Although I consider myself to be culturally Jewish, Neomi knew that I was interested in attending the classes in her home for academic purposes and she has always been open to aiding me with her knowledge of the community.

[13] Cynthia Lewis, Patricia Enciso, and Elizabeth B. Moje, *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

[14] David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (New York: Routledge, 1998); James P. Gee, "Thinking, Learning, and Reading: The Situated Sociocultural Mind," in *Situated Cognition*, ed. D. Kirschner and J. Whitson (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), 235–60; New London Group, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (1996): 60–92; Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984), and Brian V. Street, *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education* (New York: Longman, 1995).

[15] New Literacy Studies is an epistemology that turned away from focusing on individuals and their "private" minds to an ecological approach seeing literacy as integral to its context, where interactions, social practices, and situated meanings are sources of knowledge.

[16] "Reading" is appropriated here in the Freirean sense of "reading the word and the world" (Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* [Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1987]).

purposes (there are no generic literacy practices). This paradigm also suggests that literacy, language, and power are so intertwined that education for a specific literacy is always a political act. "The control of literacy, its use and the conditions under which people become literate, is an enduring political and religious preoccupation."[17] The *shiyour* substantiates these features of a literacy practice through educators' control over texts, technologies, and language use for perpetuating the community's historical political arrangements where men are able to access power through learning denied to women and where women are taught to accept subordination.

Despite the popular notion that increased access to literacy leads to personal advancement and social improvement in terms of increasing social opportunities, if we look at the "consequences" of literacy (the justification of spending resources on education) we find that greater literacy does not necessarily correlate with increased equality, expanded democracy, or improved conditions. It is associated much more closely with continuing social stratification (stronger indices of future opportunities or lack thereof being age, gender, race, and ethnicity[18]). "Schooling and the techniques of teaching literacy are often forms of hegemony" rather than a neutral process;[19] they are a form of social control as educators socialize their students into the established hierarchy and a specific moral code with goals of changing or preserving learners' values, skills, and knowledge bases, and maintaining a group's existing relations of power.[20]

Concomitantly, I argue that despite being allowed access to education, the limited and prescribed nature of this education leads not to greater equality for the women participants of the *shiyour*, but rather to the socialization of the students into the historically established gender and power relationships within which they continue to be subordinate to the patriarchy.

### *Social and Cultural Reproduction Theory*

Social and cultural reproduction theories show us that educational institutions are major sites of reproduction, legitimization, and transmission of so-

[17] James Collins and Richard Blot, *Literacy and Literacies: Text, Power, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

[18] Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

[19] Street, *Literacy,*11.

[20] Michael W. Apple, "Can Schooling Contribute to a More Just Society?" *Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice* 3, no. 3 (2008): 239–62; Madeleine Arnot, "Male Hegemony, Social Class, and Women's Education," *Journal of Education* 164, no. 1 (February 1982): 64–89; James P. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology and Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Street, *Literacy*.

cially constructed beliefs regarding stratification and power relations.[21] "The reproduced cultures provide the legitimation for gender relationships, defining gender-differentiated patterns as voluntary, chosen or based on merit, rather than on systemic sexism."[22] By internalizing the behaviors, language, use of artifacts, and by physical presence, learners "realize" their gendered positions and ensure the reproduction of the social status quo of power relations where men dominate women.

In the *shiyour*, students learn to internalize and accept as "natural" the existing culture structures and ideologies (reality maps) of their community, attaching to them "the elements of *good sense* that people have"[23] through specific use of language situated in a specific literacy practice. The sociocultural reproduction of the existing state of power differentiations—inequality in participation in prayer, legal status, religious education, and communal leadership—is thus ensured.

*Language*

Literacy is in language, but language is more than words alone. James Gee describes the combination of words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as body language and behaviors that we learn throughout life as a Discourse: a way of being in the world.[24] A Discourse is a kind of identity kit for users, complete with instructions on how to dress, act, talk, read, and write in order to take on a particular role that others will recognize, or be accepted as a member of a particular group. After being socialized into our initial home Discourse (family culture and mother tongue), we begin interacting with institutions in the public sphere (for example, school, local store, religious institutions, or national agencies) for which we acquire new Discourses through apprenticeships within them. These are secondary Discourses that Gee associates with literacy, and he distinguishes between dominant and nondominant secondary Discourses.[25] Only mastery of dominant secondary Discourses at a particular place and time brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social "goods" such as money and status.

Language also wields power. In order for a discourse of authority to exert its

[21] Arnot, "Male Hegemony"; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Judith P. Goetz and Linda Grant, "Conceptual Approaches to Studying Gender in Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 19 (1988): 182–96.

[22] Goetz and Grant, "Conceptual Approaches," 189.

[23] Apple, "Can Schooling Contribute to a More Just Society?" 249, emphasis added.

[24] James P. Gee, "What Is Literacy?" *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry* (1987): 3–11, and James P. Gee, "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics," *Journal of Education* 171, no. 1 (1989): 5–19.

[25] He defines literacy as the control—being able to use and function to the full degree of mastery—of language use in secondary Discourses.

power it must be uttered by a person legitimately licensed to do so (a teacher) in a legitimate situation (where there is a cultural fit between the content and the context of the speech act—for example, the *shiyour*) and it must exhibit the correct forms of speech or language.[26] Another most important criterion must be met: the existence of an audience willing to be governed and dominated, because "the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs."[27]

The *shiyour* is a site where prescribed literacy is learned by a group of students being inducted into a secondary dominant Discourse that provides them with a "tool kit for being" in a desired way of life. As the Chabad students access the community funds of historically and socially constituted knowledge, their identities and relationships to other members of the community—past, present, and future—are shaped, refined, and fortified. The acquisition of this secondary Discourse through consent (the students have chosen to join Chabad and to come to the *shiyour*) imbues the language of the texts with power as it simultaneously strengthens the community and gives the students the possibility of accumulating personal social capital reflected in increased status for their families.

*Agency*

An important concept related to identity construction is agency: the "strategic making and remaking of selves within structures of power."[28] This process is in dialectical relationship with the structures of power within which the person acts, such that "subjects make/authorize the power that makes them" through rituals of consent.[29] As actors learn to negotiate a Discourse, they consent to the existing power relations within which they can assume agency, which in some situations can challenge oppressive powers, in others only tweak them, and yet at other times will work to reproduce them.[30]

The concept of "relative agency" can help us avoid the simplification of seeing agency only through the perspective of our dominant model of liberalism (as free will, independence, and self-fulfillment).[31] Agency studied through a relativistic lens challenges us to contextualize our observations, "to analyze the extent to which a given action affords reciprocal power to a given agent."[32] Looking at agency by repositioning ourselves to the Chabad women's eye level

[26] Bourdieu, *Language*; and Collins and Blot, *Literacy and Literacies*.

[27] Bourdieu, *Language*, 113.

[28] Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, *Reframing*, 4.

[29] Elizabeth Pritchard, "Agency without Transcendence," *Culture and Religion*, no. 3 (November 2006): 263–87.

[30] Elizabeth B. Moje and Cynthia Lewis, "Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research," in Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, *Reframing*, 18.

[31] Pritchard, "Agency."

[32] Ibid., 279.

allows us to recognize the empowering aspects of the *shiyour*. Although the students assume agency through their studies mostly to reproduce power hierarchies, some also manage to tweak these same texts to access what they consider to be personal status and power.

## Reading the World to Read the Word—The Context

> Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context.
>
> —Paulo Freire

### *Traditional Orthodox Judaism and Learning*

The foundation of all Jewish sacred texts is the Written *Torah*—the biblical five Books of Moses. Its interpretations throughout time and commentaries on the original texts as well as rabbinic discussions of these interpretations are recorded in the Oral Torah (*torah shebe'al peh*).[33] Historically, every male in a Jewish community starting at age three would (ideally) begin studying these texts and continue doing so for the rest of his life, while girls and women were traditionally excluded from this obligation as well as from the benefits associated with it.

The Torah commands all Jewish men to engage in study "day and night" (Josh 1:8). This is considered a premier obligation because the knowledge acquired guides a life of carrying out the Torah's mitzvoth (divine commandments)—behavior that connects the learner with his God and accelerates the coming of the Messiah.[34] Such studying, however, is done not only for enhancing personal knowledge but also for *leshma*—for the purpose of fulfilling the commandment of learning which begets "appropriate" behavior, which in turn strengthens the community throughout time. Lynn Davidman clarifies:

> Judaism as a religion is more oriented toward *halacha* than toward an elaboration of a systematic theology. The rabbinical texts that have been written over the millennia of Jewish history sought to expand on the meaning of the commandments: volumes have been dedicated to elabo-

[33] There are several tomes that make up the Oral Torah, the most prominent being the two Talmuds, Babylonian and Jerusalem.

[34] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998); Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995); and Michael Rosenak, "Jewish Fundamentalism in Israeli Education," in *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*, ed. M .E. Marty and R. S. Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 374–414. In Chasidic communities, this obligation may translate into a few years of full-time study for a young man right before and after marriage when his parents or in-laws agree to support him economically.

> ration of minutiae of law rather than to nuanced analyses of the nature of God. Therefore, unlike in Christianity, in which certain beliefs such as the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord are critical for membership, *within Judaism, acceptance of beliefs about God are much less important than is behaving in the appropriate manner*.[35]

Studying the *Torah* is a community act of cultural socialization as well as a religious quest, maintaining both the community and the individual soul. By studying, you indicate your commitment to the good of the community within a networking concept—one learns in order to be linked to the past and continue building the chain into the future.[36] By studying these specific literacies, one also accrues social capital, which begets status and power for the learner and his/her family.[37]

Within Orthodox Judaism, women's education has historically been restricted in both form and content as a means of regulating their behavior and maintaining the traditional gendered hierarchy. The differentiated access to literacies of power undergirds the differentiated access to power in the public sphere emanating from a self-feeding conceptual loop: according to Jewish law, the greater the religious obligations (such as learning) of an individual, the greater are one's potential worth and legal privileges (including access to positions of authority and power). Since women have lesser religious obligations than men they are disenfranchised from the onset.[38] Other traditional explanations regarding gendered differential access to specific vernacular literacies suggest that the public nature of such activity is not considered modest enough for girls and women. Or that their role as homemakers does not leave them time for the deep learning necessary for Talmud study.[39] Consequently, women

[35] Davidman, *Tradition,* 136–37, emphasis added.

[36] Jonathan Boyarin, "Voices around the Text: The Ethnography of Reading at Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem," *Cultural Anthropology* 4, no. 4 (1989): 399–421; Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992); and Rosenak, "Jewish Fundamentalism."

[37] A *talmid chacham* (a bright/sharp student) is considered a valuable match and even if he is impoverished will be sought after by the well-to-do for their daughters.

[38] Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004). Some examples: Orthodox women cannot become judges or serve in situations of authority over men (in 1969, the Ultra-orthodox party left the government in Israel when Golda Meir became prime minister). Men are the official heads of families and they have custody of the children until puberty. Women are powerless to effect changes in their own marital status, and although they were (and still are) allowed to work in the public arena to support the family, all the woman's earnings belong to her husband (Adler, *Engendering Judaism*; and Ross, *Expanding*).

[39] Heilman, *Defenders*; Tamar Rapoport and Yoni Garb, "The Experience of Religious Fortification: The Coming of Age of Religious Zionist Young Women," *Gender and Education* 10, no. 1 (1988): 5–20; and Rosenak, "Jewish Fundamentalism." The latest news on this topic, however, was announced on January 27, 2010, when the first Orthodox Jewish woman was ordained to be a *Rabbah* (female Rabbi) after studying at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York City for seven years. She will

were formally taught only those parts of the sacred texts that fell under the category of *hahalachot hatzrechot lahen* (laws/ways necessary for them) in order for them to be able to fulfill their roles as members of the community. These texts are mostly biblical stories, rabbinic interpretations of these stories and laws/ways regarding running the household, raising children, and celebrating the holidays.

*Chabad Chasidism and Learning*

In Chabad, things are slightly different. The Lubavitcher *Rebbe* taught that the ultimate goal towards which all Chasidic Jews must strive is for the Messiah to come to earth and redeem humanity from being trapped in the darkness of the material world, from living a meaningless and aimless life and from the suffering and exile (from Paradise) which is now its fate. This will happen sooner when the more divine commandments are carried out. So in order to hasten redemption, Chabad *Chasidim* have two contingent missions related to learning (an essential component of all members' lives): to study the Torah and fulfill its commandments (like any other Orthodox Jew), and at the same time, to increase the number of Jews in the world through procreation and outreach so they too can fulfill commandments. With every mitzvah performed and with every *ba'al tshuvah* (returning Jew), there is increased light in the world and the Messiah comes a step closer to revelation.[40]

*Chabad Women's Education*

The late Lubavitcher *Rebbe* was a staunch believer in women's learning. He saw the women as collaborators in the great drive to carry out the divine commandments and established the first conference of "Women and Daughters of Chabad" in 1956, where he and other movement scholars taught the participants about Chabad.[41] The *Rebbe* wanted to strengthen the women's connection to God and the community by instructing them to learn more about issues and ways of Chasidism above and beyond "what was necessary" for daily life. This literacy included "the ideas behind the laws," the Oral Torah, the se-

---

have selective judicial and ceremonial duties. "Orthodox woman to get title of 'rabbah,'" *JTA*, January 27, 2010, http://jta.org/news/article/2010/01/27/1010355/orthodox-woman-to-get-title-of-rabbah.

[40] Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe*, adapted by S. Jacobson (New York: William Morrow, 1995). The general outreach dimension of the Chabad ideology must be interpreted in light of the group's history. The Chasidim had lived and thrived in hundreds of communities throughout Central Europe since the eighteenth century. During the Holocaust, most of them perished at the hands of the Nazis, their communities erased from the face of the earth. The survivors of these communities, mostly in the United States and Israel, have been trying to rebuild and regain the strength—both in numbers and in spirit—that was historically theirs. Learning in the Chabad community is therefore a personal, community, and global endeavor and it is the backdrop of the *shiyour*.

[41] Weil, "Beginning of the Women's Era."

crets of kabbalah, and the foundations of Chasidism doctrine.[42] The *Rebbe* also harnessed the women's mental and physical energies for outreach purposes as teachers of other women and mentors for the newcomers, engendering the first *shiyour* in 1972.[43] Moreover, women were asked to complement men's service of proselytizing, becoming emissaries (*shluchot*) in their own right (rather than being "wives of emissaries"). For a time, it sounded as if the educational field was opening up and leveling out.

However, Chabad's current formal position on women's education states the following:

> Shortly after ascending to the leadership of Lubavitch, the Rebbe founded Lubavitch Women's Organization . . . the first major women's organization which did not emphasize the objectives of fund raising and auxiliary activities, but education. Education of self and of others. For oneself continuing intellectual and emotional growth through Torah study, particularly Chassidic teachings which provide the philosophical background for the way of life and pride of the Jewish woman, explaining the uniqueness of her role as foundation of the home (*akeret habayit*); and the unique powers granted her.[44]

This statement seems to ignore the new ideas about women learning more complex and prominent literacies and retreats to the traditional position of allowing them only functional education. Concomitantly, the majority of *shiyourim* I attended dealt exclusively with these topics. However, another *shiyour* in a different setting and with older women in attendance rose to an abstract level dealing directly with the *Rebbe*'s (Yiddish) writings and more in the spirit of his concept of women's education.[45]

Contemporary Chasidic women I have talked to see their de facto limited access to studying much of the sacred texts as role differentiation rather than oppression or domination. All members are working for the physical (proliferation) and spiritual (quickening the coming of the Messiah) goals of the community, they argue, but while men do this through learning, women are expected to work and excel at motherhood. Sarah Benor writes that "the focus of the women . . . has to be to transmit *yiddishkeit* [Jewishness] to the next generation in terms

[42] Ibid., 67.

[43] During the 1960s and 1970s, women were complaining in community publications about the lack of educational outlets and intellectual roles for women/mothers in the Lubavitch community (Morris, *Lubavicher Women in America*).

[44] "The Women in Lubavitch," http://www.chabad.org.

[45] The question in that specific *shiyour* was why the Torah begins with the second letter of the alphabet (*bet*) rather than with the first (*alef*), which is also part of the name of God, an issue that rises above and beyond what is necessary for everyday life.

of *neshama* [the soul]."[46] And women have their own ways of connecting with God, not necessarily through study, as taught in the Gur Chasidic community in Israel: "How does a mother study? By giving up things that she likes: clothes, jewelry, a wig, she makes the Torah hers. If the woman is satisfied with the minimum and manages her household wisely, she makes the Torah hers."[47] Another Chasidic woman explains: "We don't have to go to shul three times a day to fulfill our bond with God. Our discipline is the everyday actions of our lives in our intuitive understanding of what is right. In Judaism this is recognized."[48] They do their work at home and may study if they have time, explaining the time frame of the *shiyourim* I attended—after the children are asleep and the chores done.[49]

The motivation for women to carry out their prescribed cultural role is the potential for *symbolic* power given them as illuminators of the path for their husbands and sons:

> Being a "lamplighter" of Jewish souls is even more emphatically relevant to the Jewish woman, for she is the actual candle lighter, who was given the special divine assignment, extraordinary privilege, and bright mitzvah of lighting the candles for the holy Shabbat and festivals; and in a deeper spiritual sense . . . in her role as "foundation of the home" it is her privilege to light up the Jewish home and everyone in it including her husband and children, and the friends and visitors who come into the home; and in her role as mother, she is the first to light up the young little souls of the infants, until they begin to shine on their own. Thus she has a very important share in making her house and the House of Israel as a whole a fitting home for G-d's Presence, in accordance with G-d's design and desire—"*that I may dwell among (and within) them*."[50]

### *Three Trajectories of the* Shiyour

The *shiyour* curriculum typically focuses on behaviors related to the three aspects of Chasidic education mentioned above. The first is teaching the way of life—an outreach course attempting to reach all Jews (those who are conscious of their religious affiliation and, especially, those who are not) and to either reignite the latent spark of Judaism in them or "pour fuel on the spark so it becomes a big fire of Judaism in the soul" (Mona's description). The second course is directed inward—the woman as foundation of the home and com-

[46] Sarah B. Benor, "*Talmid chachams* and *tsedeykeses*: Language, Learnedness, and Masculinity among Orthodox Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 147–69.

[47] El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*, 104.

[48] Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 46.

[49] A different *shiyour* I went to was held at midday during summer vacation. Young children were at day camp and the older women in the group didn't have children at home anymore.

[50] "The Women in Lubavitch," http://www.chabad.org.

munity—in an attempt to form, circumscribe, and redraw the boundaries of a Chasidic woman's identity. A third course is networking: reiterating religious obligations through study strengthens the community from within, helps it face the outside world with conviction, and secures its continued future.

Reaching inward has to do with the process of education, which is "the purpose of Jewish existence and at the same time a barrier against its decay."[51] This explains the major thrust of the *shiyour* and its curriculum being the construction, maintenance, and fortification of members' Jewish identity. The teachers, through specific use of historical narratives and specialized language, legitimize, construct, mold, and define the Jewish identity of the students, while reconfirming the group's sociocultural relationships. Through the literacy practice of attending the *shiyour*, women are inducted into a Discourse—a unique way of being that involves a way of using language as well as an entire set of behaviors and understandings—interweaving their lives with the community.

Tamar El-Or writes about a secondary trajectory of inward reach toward the women when there is a feeling that they are threatened by the lure of outside cultural markets.[52] Since the lives of the Chabad men are continuously linked with the sacred texts, they are not deemed in imminent danger from the secular world, but the women are considered much more vulnerable as they lack constant ideological fortification. The *Rebbe* instituted women's education after World War II to reiterate and reconfirm historicity, group ideology, and cohesion and to redraw the borders of permissible behavior.[53]

A third objective of the women's lessons is the networking aspect: "creating community among Jews through time via language."[54] The more the women come into contact with the ideology via the sacred texts and the more they hear and internalize the texts, the greater is the expected fit between their behavior and community needs. By seeking out the lessons organized for them and by persistently attending these lessons (even for a short period of time), the women are fulfilling an important commandment and are taught that by doing so they are acquiring status within their household and the community. By becoming versed in the group's ideology, they are actively securing their children's and their own place in the historical chain, connecting the community's past with its future existence.

[51] Heilman, *Defenders*, 171.

[52] El-Or, "Are They Like Their Grandmothers?"

[53] Prior to this time, the *Chasidim* lived mostly in small towns and villages, far from developing cultural markets in urban centers and cut off from outside information. Women's formal education as well as the strengthening of their religious education were considered unnecessary under those conditions.

[54] Boyarin, "Voices," 415.

## Women's Ways of Telling

> The limits of my language are the limits of my world.
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein

The purpose of all texts, written and oral, used in the *shiyour* is to teach what it means to be a member of the community on a practical, ideological, and spiritual level, connecting one to the community and to God. Mona says that she selects texts that are "related to the women's lives, topics that are philosophically fascinating, paradigms of thought, principals of Jewish thought and teachings for personal inspiration," always with the understanding that "the humdrum of life can be a dead weight for women without learning." The women are taught biblical stories relating to their lives, customs and laws for celebrating events and holidays, as well as rules (*dinim*) for personal conduct, for keeping a peaceful home (*shlom bayit*), for parenting, and life skills and general topics of interest ("When bad things happen to good people," "How to deal with grief," and so on). The texts the teachers use empower the listeners to keep moving in the "right" direction and make "correct" behavioral choices signifying their service to God's will.

It is important to mention here that since the sacred texts are inviolable and uncontestable by the lay person, "study" in Chabad communities does not mean the construction of knowledge through independent critical reading and questioning of texts, but rather receiving and memorizing "the truth" rendered through intermediaries such as teachers, rabbis, sages, and ancestors. During the *shiyour*, the women/students appropriate the role of apprentice as they internalize the ideology of the group to become experts in the knowledge for the sake of their family and community.[55] In such situations questioning is superfluous, although the lessons are not necessarily accepted without thought: "As orthodox women we accept the tradition, but it doesn't mean that we are always happy with what it says."[56]

Although the lessons I attended dealt with different topics and various texts, three major ideas were discussed and repeated in every lesson: finding one's Jewish soul (*neshamah*), building a "Jewish" character, and fulfilling the required commandments, because, Mona explained, through the act of learning the learner connects with God and by structuring daily life upon the knowledge learned, the *neshama* can shine.[57] To this end, the teachers engaged pre-estab-

[55] Barbara Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[56] Goldman, "Jewish Women's Scholarly Gain," 24.

[57] While men are expected to fulfill all of the 613 mitzvoth of the Bible, women need fulfill only all of the 365 *loh ta'aseh* ("Do not do") mitzvoth and all the other mitzvoth that are not bound by time. More specifically, however, there are three (complexes of) mitzvoth central to orthodox Jewish women's lives: *Challah* (tithe for baking the ritual bread), *Nida* (keeping family purity), and

lished literary forms (for example, anecdotes from the lives of the sages, quotations from famous rabbis and texts, myths and their approved interpretation, personal stories followed by a moral and textual analysis), which were then explained and made relevant to the lesson topic. By combining abstract ideas and spirituality with concrete, everyday situations, the teachers were simultaneously creating and validating a worldview.[58]

Mona used textual analysis as she taught that by acting according to Jewish law and fulfilling the commandments pertaining to her, a woman brings holiness and blessing onto her whole family and gives power (social capital) to her husband. By way of giving a concrete example, she cited the midrash (a homiletical exegesis of the scripture) about the biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife, Sarah:

> It is written that in the beginning, their names were Abram and Sarai, but these names were changed by God to Abraham and Sarah (adding an "h"). The homiletic legend explains that in Sarai's name the last letter was "yod"—one of the names of God. However, when God wanted to reward both husband and wife for their piety and belief in Him, he took the "yod" off of Sarai's name (this letter has a value of 10 in Hebrew numerology), divided it in half, getting two of the letter "hey" (an "h" sound, which has the value of five, and is also one of the names of God), and gave each of them one "hey" for their new names: Abra**h**am and Sara**h**.[59]

Rebecca used a personal story followed by a moral to teach that acting according to the religious dictates protects the participant both physically and emotionally. She told that her mother always dressed her in layers of clothes even when it was not cold and she could not understand why until the day she got on a crowded London bus that began moving out of the station before her mother could get on. To reach her mother she jumped off the moving bus and rolled on the street but was protected from harm by the many layers of clothing:

> So what do we learn from this—because from everything you must learn a lesson in life—we are protected from the knocks in life by the layers of *kedusha* (holiness) that we put around our own soul. So that the more we learn, and the more we understand, and the more we grow as Jewish women, the more gentle life will seem to be and the more accepting we can be of things that come our way.

---

*Hadlakat Nerot* (candle lighting at the onset of Shabbat and festivals). These three were very often the topics of the *shiyour*.

[58] El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant,* 120.

[59] The quotations in this section are transcribed from tape recordings of the *shiyourim* I attended.

Another idea is conveyed by way of a myth about a revered ancestress, teaching that emulating her behavior leads to spiritual and social rewards:

> Sarah [an ancestral matriarch] had 3 miraculous events surrounding her life: her candles burned from Shabbes [Friday evening] to Shabbes; a cloud rested on the top of her tent indicating that the divine presence was with her because of the way she kept the family laws, and her challah [the Sabbath bread] always sufficed for everyone, no matter how many guests came. These things also happened in later generations in *Beit Hamikdash* [the Temple in Jerusalem], so in a sense, Sarah was preparing the world for *Beit Hamikdash* and in a sense, *Beit Hamikdash* was trying to emulate Sarah.
>
> Now we all have our own *Beit Hamikdash* and that is our home. The holiness that you imbue in it is like the cloud that hovered over Sarah's tent. She was fortunate and got to see the cloud. We don't get to see the spiritual revelation that occurs with the good deeds that we do in our home. We don't see the difference from before we put up the *mezuzah* and after.[60] The doorpost doesn't change, the house looks the same, but we have actually changed our whole household. It's just that now we don't yet have eyes to see it. When we make a blessing over the food in our homes, when we adhere to the laws of *kashrut* [dietary laws], we don't realize that we are filling our home with holiness.

In another *shiyour*, allegory was used to teach about the necessity of keeping in constant, daily contact with God through prayer:

> The Talmud tells the story of a king who called his minister and instructed him to prepare a daily allowance that he would give to the prince, the king's beloved son. The minister thought for a while and said, "Your majesty, of course I shall do what you ask, but with all your riches and as busy as you are, wouldn't it be better if you gave your son all the money at once, or as a yearly allowance, at the very least?" To that the wise king answered, "If my son needs to come to me for money every day and I have to give him money every day, I get to see him and interact with him every day, and that is my wish."
>
> When Esther talked about personal transformation in order to reach the innermost part of our soul, she used a metaphor and produced an image that listeners could mentally revisit:
>
> "God wants us to find that part of us which is inside us, which he planted inside of us just as he planted the sap inside the tree. We should awaken to our soul and let it begin to change us. When the tree renews itself each year it grows taller; we have to grow taller inside ourselves too."

Speaking about raising children and teaching that a mother must never

[60] A case containing a small scroll on which prayers are written. A *mezuzah* must be attached to every doorpost in a Jewish home.

compare her children to each other, Nava began by quoting from the Bible: "*Hanoch layeled al pee darcoh*" ("teach the child according to his ways"), which she explained to mean that each child needs an education that will match his own particular ways of knowing. Yet there is a time and place for comparisons, Nava taught, and quoted one of the sages:

> Rabbi M. said that when it comes to material things, you must look at people who have less than you, compare and see how lucky you are. But when it comes to spirituality, look at those who have more than you, compare and see how much higher you can go.

## Critical Reflections

> Seeing literacy as a critical social practice compels us to acknowledge the power relations embedded in this practice.
>
> —Brian Street

Literacy, as access to knowledge, is politically and ideologically determined. Power holders in a community have the authority to define what constitutes knowledge, the cultural worth of different aspects of knowledge, and what access diverse groups in the community will have to any kind of knowledge/power. Education is the social means for ensuring cultural/ ideological production and reproduction, and can be used for empowerment, such as constructing and reinforcing personal/group identity, and/or for perpetuating relations of repression and domination (race, class, gender). Ideological power exercised through education aims to project these cultural ideas and practices as universal and common sense, eliciting consent of the group members without the need of coercion.[61]

According to Chabad ideology, scholarship of the sacred texts is the most valued of activities leading to high social status and positions of community leadership. Yet women's access to much of this literacy is restricted, anchored in ideologically differentiated educational goals: while it is men's duty to keep the flame of community ideology ablaze by continuous study, women are in charge of their own and their children's spirituality (*yiddishkeit*) and of enabling men's religious observation by caring for the home, children, and at times, working as the breadwinner. Women receive limited and controlled education as a means to learn correct behavior as well as "to win over every new generation to particular definitions of masculinity and femininity and to accept as natural the hierarchy of male over female, the superiority of men in society."[62]

*Shiyour* texts are the "official language" of power of the Chabad community,

[61] Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*; and Sara J. McCarthey, *Students' Identities and Literacy Learning* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002).

[62] Arnot, "Male Hegemony," 80.

communicating "appropriate behavior," which implies adherence to traditional hierarchies by emphasizing certain meanings and practices while forsaking others. "Even more critically, some meanings are reinterpreted, diluted or put into forms which support, or at least do not contradict other elements within the dominant culture."[63] Since the power of language is rooted in its contextual legitimacy, the power these texts hold over students relates to the authority position of the teachers (as emissaries of the *Rebbe*), their being expressed in accepted, traditional forms, and in the culturally legitimate setting of the *shiyour*. All of this powerful symbolism falls on the primed minds of women who accept their traditional position and the behaviors expected from them, which, they are taught, bring honor and social standing to their family. Thus the authority of the texts and their expression of male hegemony are accepted not by subordination but through knowledge acquisition, and cooperation.

The community creates a market for social capital based on knowledge of the official language. The pursuit of this cultural knowledge leads to gains of symbolic capital of status and solidarity. In the Chabad community, top social rewards are gender specific and the *shiyour* gives access to rewards to which women are allowed to aspire. Status markers such as "Woman of Valor" or *tsedeykes* (righteous woman) may be conferred on women who behave "well." This is a dynamic whereby the gatekeepers[64] of the community (the learned males) "invoke the prestige of the oppressed in order to dominate them more efficiently and ever more gently."[65]

Students are expected to assimilate the social discourse by way of recitation—accepting teachers' words unquestioningly.[66] Mona explains that critical thinking is expected of the learner in the form of analysis, comparison, and clarifying information; however, questioning the "truth" of the text is never an option. "I don't teach anything new that I invented myself. Only what is written in the Torah," she says. The students enter the Discourse and learn the official language but are confined rather than liberated by it because, while the texts open avenues toward understanding the world, they limit these understandings to the culturally acceptable only. The *shiyour* mutes the students' curiosity and silences divergent voices, but this silencing is experienced as fortification of the group and its ideology through maintaining traditional structures and behaviors.

Consequently, rooted in the division of knowledge, the *shiyour* functions to reinforce the community's power hierarchy. Patriarchy is preserved and reproduced not by oppressing women and rendering them powerless, but rather

[63] Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 205.

[64] Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007).

[65] Betensky, "Prestige of the Oppressed," 213.

[66] This is true for all members of the Chabad community, male as well as female.

by "empowering" them to carry out their roles. As Mona explains, "In homes where women are learning, they are inspired and they inspire their family members" to carry out the mitzvoth. By becoming literate in the official language, the women are, consciously or not, supporting the established order.

## Yet

> Affirmation of traditional authority and the service of liberation are not necessarily antithetical . . . since liberation is an autonomous intersubjective effort.
>
> —Jonathan Boyarin

Although Chabad women become colonized within a male-controlled "story" through their participation in *shiyourim*, far from being victims of the system's oppression, some women have learned to use this same story for personal empowerment.[67] When viewed from a Western (mythical) paradigm of individualism, self-sufficiency, and unlimited agency, the *shiyour* may seem to be an educational process focused on subordination and control of women. But two concepts must be remembered and contextualized: that gender is negotiated on an ongoing basis (even in conservative religious communities) and that literacy practices are social/ideological constructs.

According to Chabad ideology, the survival of the group and world redemption are the ultimate goal of the behaviors of *all* members, taught and fortified through all educational venues. In learning and behaving correctly, teaching and spreading "the word," some women have found and appropriated for their own agency a space in which to carry out intellectual work for strengthening and perpetuating the community as well as for raising their own voices. These women accept their imposed literacy restrictions but "re-key" the texts, creating an "unscripted third space" between the traditional spaces of the genders, where they can thrive intellectually.[68] By using the literacies in their domain as a takeoff point rather than an obstacle to growth, they empower themselves with the possibilities inherent in their chosen way of life (bringing closer the coming of Messiah) and consider themselves subordinate to no one except their *Rebbe* and their God. Such actions indicate free, fulfilling choices that reward women with power.

Within this unique space, the women of Chabad can negotiate their status and authority, highlighting their uniqueness, their powers, and exalted images of themselves in their homes and the community: "The family is like the 'holy tabernacle' on earth. Each week I bring divine presence into this household

[67] Morris, "Agents or Victims?" 161–80.

[68] Quotations from McCarthey, *Students' Identities*; and Gutierrez, "Developing a Sociocritical Literacy," respectively.

by preparing for *Shabbos*. . . . I am like a high priestess. . . . It is said that it is through women's work and efforts that the *Mashiach* will come." And "[a woman's] greatness is revealed in the proverb 'A woman of valor is the crown of her husband'—and that crown sits on top of the head, higher than the rest of it, giving it its glory."[69] "Real Judaism, the way Lubavitchers live it, is practiced every day, every hour in the home. . . . Women get to bring new life into the world—nothing men can do could possibly compete with that honor."[70]

Rivkah Slonim describes her own struggles with subordination and agency and says that although on the personal level some routes were closed to her as a woman, the larger community level offered the space she needed for assuming power in the name of the general good:

> From somewhere there must come the ability to look *beyond the individual issues to the totality that is Judaism.* For me that has been the teachings of *Chasidut*. . . . For if I wish to be in a relationship with G-d and tap into eternity, I must make room for G-d within me, even if it means negating the "I" that stands in the way.[71]

Feminism cannot be the exclusive measure of Orthodox Jewish women's lives. There are values of halachic conformity and community goals that outweigh feminist aspirations. Looking at Chabad women's subjective experiences of advocacy for traditional gender roles and domesticity, one can find not forced reproduction of oppression and identity, but rather agency for upholding the community while actively identifying as different from women in the outside world.[72] Men may define the outer boundaries of the community; dictate its grand ideology, rules, and procedures; and restrict women's power and access to specific literacies as part of the dynamics of control, hegemony, and the perpetuation of traditional culture. Yet women manage to use the literacy allowed them to transcend the limits set upon them by the patriarchy and construct a secondary, text-based ideology within which they make choices as to their behaviors. In this space lies the potential for women to exercise agency (effecting change in the world and oneself) in their families' lives (bringing honor to their husbands and teaching their children) and within the community as a whole (building the chain into the future and bringing the Messiah closer). By taking up the dominant Discourse of the community and using it to empower themselves, some of the women manage to turn their ascribed identity into an

[69] Both quotations are from Kaufman, "Engendering Orthodoxy," 147.

[70] Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 246.

[71] Rivkah Slonim, "Chassidic Feminist: My Personal Experiences," http://www.chabad.org/theJewish Woman/ article_cdo/aid/1335/jewish/Chassidic-Feminist.html, emphasis added.

[72] Hartman, *Feminism.*

achieved identity, attaining in the process, as a secondary outcome, personal status and power.[73]

Tamar El-Or contends that there are two levels of literacy found in the *shiyour*: "literacy for knowledge" of the world the women live in and "literacy for ignorance"—how they are to behave in this world in order to perpetuate their inferior social status.[74] Are Chabad women gaining knowledge or perpetuating their ignorance? Are they "agents or victims" of their group's religious ideology?[75]

I see them as both.

The women of Chabad are confined to an inferior status in terms of our Western understanding of domination, subordination, and social standing, and can be seen on many levels as victims of male hegemony. Yet, if we contextualize our observations, we can see that by freely choosing to act "correctly" according to the same laws that limit their public achievement of power, by doing their domestic duties well and fulfilling their religious obligations, including prescribed study, Chabad women are fulfilling the commandments of the *Rebbe* and preparing the world for the coming of the Messiah, just as are men with their own version of scholarship and action. The assumption of agency affords Chabad women reciprocal power as they make and remake themselves within their given social and cultural limitations. They empower themselves and gain status in a finely balanced dynamic of cooperation and mutual investment with all members of the community—male and female, moving toward common goals that cannot be achieved without each gender fulfilling its stipulated role.

[73] Wendy Cadge, and Lynn Davidman, "Ascription, Choice, and the Construction of Religious Identities in the Contemporary United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 1 (2006): 23–28.

[74] El-Or, "Are They Like Their Grandmothers?"

[75] Morris, "Agents or Victims?"